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IN THE WEST COUNTRY

MAY CROMMELIN



AUTHOR OF "QUEENIE"

GEORGE ROUTLEDGE & SONS.

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Are admitted by thousands to be worth a Guinea a Box for bilious and nervous disorders, such as wind and pain in the stomach, sick headache, giddiness, fulness and swelling after meals, dizziness and drowsiness, cold chills, flushings of heat, loss of appetite, shortness of breath, costiveness, scurvy, blotches on the skin, disturbed sleep, frightful dreams, and all nervous and trembling sensations, etc. The first dose will give relief in twenty minutes. This is no fiction, for they have done it in thousands of cases. Every sufferer is earnestly invited to try one box of these Pills, and they will be acknowledged to be

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New countries, where the natural luxuriance of plants is not checked by the grazing of domestic animals, are particularly favourable to bee culture, and when Mr. Hoge first visited California he found it was one sweet bee-garden throughout its entire length, north and south, and all the way across, from the snowy Sierra to the ocean. Wherever a bee might fly within the bounds of this virgin wilderness—through the forest, along the banks of the river, along the bluffs and headlands fronting the sea, over valley and plain, and deep leafy glen, or far up the piney slopes of the mountains, throughout every belt and section of climate—bee-flowers bloomed in lavish abundance. During the months of March, April, and May, what is known as the bee belt of Southern California is one smooth continuous bed of honey-bloom, so marvellously rich that in walking from one end of it to the other, a distance of more than four hundred miles, your feet would press more than a hundred flowers at every step.

Extending far out in the vast prairie, its unbroken bosom is often found to be one perpetual carpet of horehound flowers, lasting from spring until autumn. All the seasons are warm and temperate, so that honey never ceases to flow from this plant, which yields a profusion of blossoms almost unequalled in the vegetable kingdom. We can judge of their luxuriance, when there grows upon a slender unobtrusive little bush upwards of 3,000 blossoms, five-eighths of an inch in diameter. Each of these are reservoirs that yield them a wonderful remedy in the world for the cure of coughs, sore throats, sore lungs, &c.—horehound honey. These miniature laboratories stamp with faultless certainty this honey with a colour and flavour peculiar to itself.

The work of the honey-bee is to gather the sweet treasure so divinely prepared, and bear it off, saying to suffering humanity, "Eat! It is the soul of the Blossom."

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No Medicine ever came before the public with such unquestionable recommendations and distinguished patronage as "Hoge's Horehound Honey." It has proved a veritable revelation to all who have tried it.

THE LORD MAYOR OF LONDON ORDERS IT.

Mansion House, London, E.C.,
September 28, 1883.

The LORD MAYOR would thank Messrs. W. M. Hoge & Co. to send him half-a-dozen of their "Hoge's Horehound Honey," which has been well-recommended to him.

THE PRIMA DONNA.

Hawthorn Lodge, Finchley New Road, N.W.,
March 30, 1883.

Messrs. W. M. Hoge & Co., London.

Gentlemen,—I have much pleasure in stating that I consider your "Horehound Honey" the most wonderful remedy I have ever tried, possessing properties which are nothing short of marvellous, for the cure of affections of the throat and chest. I shall never be without a bottle of "Horehound Honey."—Yours very truly,
MARIE ROSE-MAPLESON.

Your Honey is delicious.

ELLEN TERRY.

W. L. BRIGHT, Esq., son of the RIGHT HON. JOHN BRIGHT, M.P., said "Hoge's Horehound Honey" cured his father of a bad cough."

Rev. C. D. KINGDON says, "it makes the voice clear and pleasant, and takes away all that huskiness in the throat which is so uncomfortable to preacher and congregation."

Supplied by all WHOLESALE DEALERS and by

HOGES HONEY COMPANY, Limited,
12, GREAT EASTERN STREET, E.C.

67, Warwick Road, Maida Vale, W.,
Messrs. W. M. Hoge & Co. Oct. 5, 1883.

Dear Sirs,—I have great pleasure in bearing testimony to the excellence of your "Horehound Honey" for the throat and the voice. I have used, and use it now at intervals, as I found it, for my voice, of great value, and, therefore, I can recommend it from my own experience, especially to singers.—Yours truly,
LOUISE LIEBHART.

38, Oxford Road, Islington, London, N.
Messrs. W. M. Hoge & Co.

Gentlemen,—I was troubled for a long time with a bad cough, which I feared was becoming chronic. I used your "Horehound Honey," and gave it a fair trial. I am happy to be able to tell you that it quite relieved me, and I recommend it as a certain cure.—Yours truly,
GEO. M. SMYTH.

7, Suffolk Lane, Cannon St., E.C., London,
April 30, 1883.

Messrs. W. M. Hoge & Co., London.

Gentlemen,—Having suffered for many years with irritation of the throat and chest, I never found any remedy to relieve the irritation until I purchased a bottle of your "Horehound Honey," which I did a few days since. I want to inform you it had a wonderful soothing effect, affording relief at once. Please send me one dozen bottles, and oblige yours truly,
G. F. BLACK.

IN THE WEST COUNTRIE

BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

Uniform with this Volume.

QUEENIE.

A JEWEL OF A GIRL.

ORANGE LILY.

BLACK ABBEY.

MISS DAISY DIMITY.

MY LOVE SHE'S BUT A LASSIE.

IN THE WEST COUNTRY

BY

MAY CROMMELIN

AUTHOR OF "QUEENIE"

LONDON

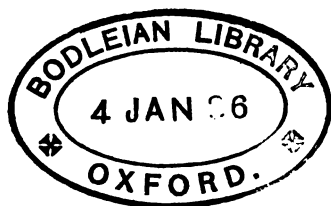
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To the Earl of Dufferin :

IN GRATEFUL REMEMBRANCE

OF MANY KIND WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT

FROM THE AUTHOR OF

" LETTERS FROM HIGH LATITUDES "

TO A YOUNGER WRITER FROM THE SAME COUNTY.

MAY CROMMELIN.

October, 1883.

IN THE WEST COUNTRIE.

CHAPTER I.

OUR home was lovely !

I verily believe in all the length and breadth of England you could not find one other, of its own size, to match with the charms of that dearest old place.

One knows old-world tales of love in a cottage ; which homely nest, of course, is always a bower of bliss, hidden in creepers. Our house was like three or four still more delightful cottages joined into one old Saxon homestead ; each just touching its brother at angles, and staring at a different quarter of pleasant earth and sky ; but all bound together in love by the roses that almost smothered the walls, peeped in at the windows, hung from the carved barge-boards, and kissed the old home red or white with blossoms, from spring to autumn.

Not only roses, but every pleasant plant that creeps on walls ; as many as only Solomon—or our old gardener—knew.

And as to gables ! why, each side of the house seemed to have at least eight of them, some built with timber cross-beams in the masonry, others with

wooden carvings everywhere, and stone niches for little patron saints; while all had steep tiled roofs, with corbie-steps, crow-stones, glittering vanes, and the funniest twisted chimneys in the world. Windows here, there, everywhere; big ones with cool embrasures and deep seats, little ones in the most unlikely nooks; windows latticed, or paned with bottle-stump glass. But this last was no modern imitation. All was of ancient date at Stoke, excepting—well, perhaps ourselves.

Stoke was simply the name of our home. (In ignorance, I once used to wonder why there were so many Stokes in England, till told it meant merely "place.") Stoke-Bracy *used* to be its proper designation; but that was when the former owners lived there. My mother thought Stoke was simpler, and perhaps had fewer associations.

Indoors, there was a real old dining-hall, dating from Saxon days, with no story betwixt the guests' board and the lofty roof, but a louvre overhead to let out the fumes of smoke and good cheer. The rest of the house was two-storied only; which explains why it spread over so much ground.

In the entrance-saloon, as it might be more properly termed than hall, seeing it had always been a sitting-room, there were four splendid, full-length portraits let into the panelling, by Lely, Kneller, Reynolds, and Lawrence, of ancestors who—were not ours!

The fact is, to confess quickly, we were only Browns—Browns of no place, till the last spendthrift old Bracy squire was obliged to sell Stoke. Browns without an *e*; Browns in trade; nothing more! None of us were even born at Stoke, though Rose was a mere baby when we came.

My earliest recollections are of living in our grub

stage, in a genteel semi-detached villa outside the town where my father made his fortune; of our perambulators being aired in a small provincial Zoo; and of our mother's cool and haughty remarks, caught up unawares by our little pitcher-like ears, that "if her old equals in the county did not choose to call upon her, she for her part did not choose to be called upon by the ladies of the town." She was perfectly happy, she would observe in her beautifully-trained voice, without either society. For she was a Beaumanoir, daughter of Sir Reginald Beaumanoir, the last baronet of his impoverished family; and our mother's marriage was supposed to have been a judicious alliance of fortune with family, though attachment had somehow crept in.

Nevertheless, though so avowedly content, she never rested till my father first bought a county place, and then retired from the greater part of his business.

What happiness was ours when we first heard the news, that we were henceforth to live among woods and pastures! How we "babbled of green fields"! Oh, the pictures we surreptitiously drew on our slates when the governess wasn't looking—of ourselves perched on strange animals, beneath which was generally written, "This is a Pony"; of ourselves (recognisable as human by having outstretched hands with five fingers each as long as our bodies) standing five in a row before the ideal dwelling my father had described—which we portrayed as about half the height of the aforesaid five, all windows and chimneys, with a volcano cloud of smoke eddying away in the distance.

When we did see Stoke it surpassed, however, our wildest imaginings.

Shall I ever forget the close of our long journey there; when, after wearisome, dusty highways, we passed

into the shade of the great woods that for three miles round lovingly sheltered this gem of a home from the rough outside world? The evening breeze again seems to fan my brow as we all sat up, refreshed and full of curiosity, and gazed at the great trees, the bracken coverts, the open down-like patches where the rabbits fed by scores; getting sudden glimpses as we wound along a wooded height of a charming, mysterious valley below.

Then—when the house came in sight—we all gave a cry!

The sun was sinking, and each window seemed redly illumined to “meet and greet” us on our first crossing the threshold of what was thenceforth “home.” The walls were covered with a drooping mantle of flowers. Flowers, flowers bloomed everywhere — around the dwelling in exquisitely trim borders, in parterres, in old-fashioned vases round little pebbled courts filling nooks and angles, in the centre whereof small fountains played, or old sun-dials stretched shadow-fingers. And the whole quaint homestead, its flowers, gables, flashing weather-cocks, all seemed to be peeping over the edge of a smoothly-shaven grassy slope, that descended with treacherous suddenness and depth into a bosky valley. There a little lake reflected woods around its further three sides, where beech-branches swept the water, while the swans, as

On still St. Mary's lake,
floated,

Double, swan and shadow.

And in the heart of these woods that trended lake-wards from the high ground whereon we stood, were hid baby ravines and gorgelets. Down these trickled little brooklets under the thick foliage overhead, singing only to

fairy glens, tall forested with ferns such as human eye or hand had hardly ever seen or disturbed in their damp, cool haunts.

Next morning a slight incident happened that always associated itself afterwards with my first impressions of Stoke.

Bob and I had agreed to rise early and explore our new kingdom, while the rest of the dull world was still asleep. Bob came next to me in the family, callow, awkward, and constantly in disgrace with our parents and teachers, but dearest and most delightful of brothers. His head was long; his straight hair, always ill-cut and ill-parted, was just the colour of a canary's wing; his eyes, though beaming with high spirits, were of the weakest light-blue, his hands and feet were much too big, and his joints loose. Ugly was he?—

“No matter for that,” King Henrye cryd;

“I love him the better therefore.”

There was no use in asking Alice, our elder sister, to come too. She loved pranks, but not early rising or hurried dressing, thank you; besides, she slept near the governess.

Our eldest brother Beaumanoir was at school. Beau we all called him when our mother was out of earshot. Rose was too much of a baby.

So we two rose and stole out by ourselves.

I remember, like yesterday, the dewy freshness of the whole sweet face of earth around us that new morning. How the birds sang their matin praises in all the bushes more clearly, and the flowers smelt sweeter, than ever before or after, and the trees seemed taller, and swayed their branches in more stately harmony.

“Let's come down to that little flower-garden that we

found last night," said Bob, as if he was a first discoverer of the spot.

We agreed, as usual. The garden was a delightful spot of primness, though just beyond its stone boundary wall nature reasserted her easy wilder sway in meadows and woodland. Its little paths were paved carefully in chequers of black and white pebbles; the box edges were clipped straight and stiff like rows of military vegetation; yew-trees stood about shaped like chess-pieces among the Queen Anne flower-beds. On the one side peeps could be had through outside shrubbery of the lake, that still lay in shadow, but for one bright gleam at the far side, where rays from the east just flashed on it a wakening summons. And, looking upwards behind us a little way, the old house showed its most charming side of all.

"Isn't it a little Paradise, Bob!" I exclaimed, after we had dived down a pleached alley of jessamine and emerged among the yew pawns to gaze round, hard breathing in our haste and full of enchantment. "How I should love to be queen here!" (*i.e.* be lord over my brethren in this acre and a half). "There can't be any other home in the wide world half so delightful as this!"

"*There cannot!*" said a strange voice beside us, with a sound more like a sudden sob of pain wrung out unawares than a sigh.

We both started.

Close beside us, hidden hitherto by the yews, stood a young lad, much older than Bob, older even than Beau. His arms were folded, as if we had surprised him in a meditative survey of Stoke and its grounds. One quick, hesitating look at us, one glance all round at house, woods, and valley; then he darted towards a corner of

the ivy-coloured garden-wall, and springing up, seized a strong tree-branch that hung just overhead along the wall, and swung himself into invisibility, as far as we were concerned, on the other side.

"Stop thief!" cried Bob, instantly giving chase.

"Stop, Bob!" cried I, instantly full of fears for my valorous brother, but running after him—with a very weak heart and a very great wish to run the other way.

Bob sprang at the wall, trying likewise, he too, to vault it, but fell back with injured, bleeding hands, a fringe of cruel glass in the masonry having been hidden by the ivy. No matter! still gallant, he jumped up at the branches above, but caught no doubt the wrong ones, for one only swung him a little upwards, and another fairly broke under his weight. After this second fall, Bob sat still on the ground looking rueful.

"Come away, come away," I urged, in a tone of beseeching comfort; "he's gone *long* ago."

"If we could only have caught him!" sighed my young brother, slowly rising, and not understanding apparently my feminine reasons for leaving the spot. "He may have been a poacher, you know, or some sort of a desperate robber."

"Oh, *do* come back to the house," I entreated, trembling.

Bob, however, would only do this after a careful examination of the mysterious visitor's means of disappearance. By standing on inverted flower-pots we discovered that the wall was everywhere protected by a deep dry ditch on the far side, excepting at this one especial spot. And, presently, we marked the very bough the trespasser had used, though it was too high for Bob, jump as he might.

"I say! he must have known his way about most

awfully well," observed Bob, putting his head on one side with a sagaciously mysterious air.

Then a six-o'clock farm-bell rang to work (for we had been out since five), and the figure of the gardener was seen approaching.

"Let us go and tell him about it," I suggested. "You know papa says he is such an honest man."

On our father's return from one of his previous visits to prepare Stoke for our arrival, we had heard him praising this man Verity to our mother, as a pattern of rude fidelity. Born and bred in Stoke, and having hardly ever been out of its parish, Joe Verity had since boyhood attached himself so devotedly to the Bracys, that he curtly told my father he could never bear to see a new family there, so he would go "when the place went."

"Now, you know, that's what I call a fine fellow, so I begged him to remain," cried my father, in whom staid business traditions had never damped a warm natural enthusiasm. "You don't see too much of that spirit now. I offered to raise the poor fellow's wages, for the Bracys could not afford to give him much, you know. But no!—no use, till at last young Bracy, the grandson, himself advised him to stay on, and that settled the matter. The poor man had some wild notion, it seems, of being able to go with his young master. He'll make us a good servant, that you may depend on," ended my father.

"I hope he will make us a good *gardener*," said my mother, in her gentle, high-bred voice, never so carried away by feeling as to lose sight of the main object, like my father, although she was a Beaumanoir born, and he only a business Brown.

Verity was fastening creepers on the wall when we

went up to him eagerly with our story. He listened stolidly enough till we described the tree-branch, but at that looked round hastily, and made a few steps towards the spot. Then he stopped himself, and returning to his work, asked us gruffly, with an averted head: "What was he like? was he common-looking?"

"No, no," we cried; and hastened to describe the strange youth, whose figure now I can hardly recall.

Joe Verity only nodded, holding some nails and a bunch of list in his mouth.

"But was he a robber? tell us! was he a thief?" cried Bob, impatient of this unmoved man's manner of receiving our news.

Verity turned round to us—a squarely-built, self-reliant man, strong in body as in his iron will, with a broad brow in which were two wrinkles furrowed by honest endeavour to do constantly the best that was in him.

"It was no robber," he just answered, taking the nails out of his mouth to speak, and then putting them in again, while he looked at us with a doubtful expression in his deep-set gray eyes, that we detected. "He'll not come back again; so you need trouble your heads no more about him."

But the gardener did not then quite understand children's ways, nor our curiosity. We slipped away, grumbling to each other at the romance of our adventure being stifled.

"Well, we'll tell nurse about it; and papa when we see him at lunch-time," we murmured, sure of fellow-feeling in those quarters.

Verity looked after us, scratching his head, while the two wrinkles in his forehead deepened extraordinarily.

Then he called out to me:

"Hi—little Missy! Miss Brown, I suppose?"

"Yes," I said, coming back with a child's willingness, though thinking him a rude man to go on with his work and call me to come to him. "But I'm not Miss Brown; that is my elder sister. I'm only Miss Pleasance."

"That's a queer name, anyhow," remarked Verity, as if loth to say yet why he had called me back.

"Well, but what do you want?" I now questioned with some dignity, feeling Bob's chin planted on my left shoulder, while his face, I knew, was alive with expectation.

"See," said Verity gravely, "I've been taking crown counsel, as the lawyers might say;" and he gave a last inquiring rub at his crisply black head. "I'm not forbidding you to tell your father or your nurse; that's right enough, but still—I think him you saw this morning would rather not have it spoke about. He had as good a right here as yourselves; ay, and far better unto—yesterday." Here the gardener's face softened wonderfully, and he turned slowly to fasten up a rose-branch, continuing: "If so be as he came early this morning to take a last look at the old place, he didn't think to disturb any of ye; and you, miss, being older than your brother, have sense enough to know a sore heart shuns gossip."

"Was it—the grandson of old Squire Bracy?" I asked in an awe-struck whisper. "We won't say a word about it."

Our oracle just gave a sort of satisfied nod at us, and replied:

"It might ha' been—or one of the family, leastwise. I did not see him, mind ye."

We went away quite proud of the secret, as of our

own future staunchness in keeping it; and that morning was thenceforth enveloped in a halo of romance to us.

To our credit be it said, I only told Rose after a year or so; and Bob only told Beau. When the latter came back from school, he treated the adventure loftily as one of our silly childish marvels, and soon forgot it. For fear of more ridicule, we neither of us ever told Alice, who always laughed at us in an elderly and irritating way.

CHAPTER II.

THE next event I most clearly remember in our family history happened some years later.

Bob must have been at Harrow a year or two, I think; and both he and Beau had come home for the Easter holidays.

It was a chilly, sunny Sunday morning. "Pleasance! Pleasance! Are you ready for church?" they were calling in the house; and I can recall so well creeping slowly down the shallow steps of dark-oak stairs, holding heavily by the balusters with a swimming sensation in my head.

"Why, child, what is the matter with you?" asked my mother, who was standing below in a ray of sunshine that came through a latticed window.

She somehow impressed me that moment as looking so calm, elegant, pretty; so different in everything from myself. Her dress of that respectably old, if not venerable, date is before my mind's eye now.

A pink cambric made in three great flounces all round; her taper waist drawn still tighter by a sash tied in long loops in front; her sleeves puffed wide at the shoulder, but skin-fitting at the wrists; her fair hair brought down in shining bands below her ears; and a tiny gathered bonnet almost falling back off her pretty head.

"Are you ill?" she repeated with light marvelling, as if such an occurrence was most unlikely in her family.

"I don't know, mother," replied that miserable being Me; "but I do feel rather sick. Please, may I stay at home from church?"

"*Sick!* what an expression!" said my mother, with a gesture of slight disgust; but she gave the required permission after critically looking at me. I slipped away into the library because it was least frequented, and, feeling rather ashamed of myself, hid in a window-seat behind the curtains. A door near was open into the morning-room, and my mother's voice reached me, saying confidentially: "Pleasance is unwell. I don't know how it is, that child is such a goose."

"My dear, you ought to think your

"Every goose a swan,
And every lass a queen,"

laughingly remonstrated my father in his clearest and cheeriest of strong voices coming from a little body. "Can any of us help feeling out of sorts at times?"

"Well, somehow, if there is any infection going she is sure to catch it," repeated my mother with accusation still in her tone. "Certainly, neither she nor Bob are Beaumanoirs in that or anything else."

"Well, my dear, they are good Browns, and take

after my family in names and natures, so I must see after this sick gosling," returned my father, good-humouredly as ever; and then I heard his voice calling me, evidently full of solicitude.

Slipping out by the other door, I found him standing below the stairs just where my mother had been. Trim, tidy, he was a very little man, who always seemed trying to stand on his heels with his chest much expanded in order to look bigger. He had the ruddiest English face, and the largest loving heart in the world. No; he certainly was not handsome, but there never was, or will be, his like to me again.

After receiving his caresses, and advice to go out and have some fresh air, I watched them all packing into the long family waggonette.

There was Beau, our pride, our Etonian, carefully smoothing his tall hat with a fine-airs expression on his handsome young face. There was Alice, laughing at my weebegone looks, as usual; always laughing, always lovely!

Certainly, it was very odd that she and Beaumanoir should have been given by our mother her family's names while in their cradles, and that they dutifully followed her family's characteristics.

My name, I afterwards learnt, had been a matter of slight dispute, since it was most pre-eminently a Brown one. "There always had been a Pleasance in his family," my father, however, firmly insisted though so easy-going, "and he wished there always might be."

It must have cost my mother a little effort to repress a slight curl of her lip at the idea of the Brown family having "always" existed, or indeed having any clear reason to give for their being (except on the plea that trade is a human want), till the best of them was united

[illegible]

with a stick as far as the lake, and we'll search for wild-ducks' nests along the edge."

He soon persuaded me, though I felt very unwell; and down by the lake we hunted through reed-beds and rushes. The only thing that kept Bob from pulling off his boots and stockings to wade, was, I believe, that his toe was *better* than it should be.

At last, we tried up a little back-water all fringed with alders and willows. Suddenly there was a startling whirr and rush of wings from under our very noses, and with a great "Quack—quack!" disturbing the Sunday quiet of the woods, out flew a mallard and his mate from the rushes.

"Hooroo!" cried Bob, and plunged along the bank through boughs and brambles joyfully. "Here's the nest just below me—and eggs! I can see them! It's down there close by the water."

See the eggs, yes! but he could not reach them.

We did not mean to rob the poor wild duck, but who could resist inspection of such a nest? So Bob crept down to the edge cautiously, and then—there being little foothold—caught firmly by an alder branch above him with both hands. He

Thought it was a trusty tree,
But syne it bowed and then it brak.—

Even so!—

A crack—a souse!—and down went poor Bob into the oozy stream, still clinging as he went to that faithless branch. To my eternal shame be it recorded, as he rose all streaming and spluttering, I laughed till my sides so ached that, being weak, I had to sit down and hold by another alder. How ridiculously one does laugh while still in short frocks! But the first thing Bob did

was, to stand up in the muddy water and laugh too. To end the matter, we retreated homewards, hoping devoutly to reach unseen the cottage of our former nurse, who had now been taken to wife by Joe Verity. But as ill-luck would have it, back came the church-party and caught us—Bob watering the carriage-drive as he went from all his garments, and every lank hair of his head.

That afternoon I grew worse, and the old doctor was sent for; “black dose” being whispered by my sinking heart, and read in my brothers’ and sisters’ pitying looks. But when our village medicine-man left, towards evening, my good father—finding Master Bob alone outside the porch, looking dejected under my mother’s silent scorn of the existence of such a goose—put his hand on his shoulder, saying kindly:

“Look here, old fellow! That toe of yours was rather shammed this morning. Come—you know I don’t like you boys to miss church. Still, considering the lesson you got, we’ll say no more about it.”

Bob looked and felt desperately contrite; but then seeing my father smile, thought he might as well smile too.

“What about Pleasance?” he asked with interest; “how is she?”

“Oh, she’s not at all badly,” said father with an intentionally cheerful air. “It doesn’t signify, they say, only she’s got the measles.”

“NO,” said Bob, awestruck. “How many of them?”

Poor Bob soon might ask the same question about himself, for, faithful to me in all things, he was ill too by morning. And then with a whistle from Beau at the news, and a shiver of Alice’s pretty shoulders, and a frightened laugh from Rosie, my mother announced

further, that these uninfected ones were straight to be hurried off on a visit to our grand-aunt, Miss Beaumanoir, who lived ten miles away in a tumbledown dower-house styled by its owner The Barn.

CHAPTER III.

OUR grand-aunt, it may here be remarked, was an oddity. "In fact," as Joe Verity thus once delivered himself, "she's the greatest curiosity, out of being bottled in spirits in a museum, ever *I* saw; but ye could never mistake her for anything *but* a lady once she came to speak to ye."

This last was quite true; but, as may be shown later, at a distance foolish persons might be forgiven for erring.

From our childhood, in our distant town-house, we had been taught to venerate this relative; the last remaining representative of the Beaumanoirs, as our mother carefully instructed us. Indeed, it was chiefly because our Aunt Bee lived in the dower-house of her ancestors, and that Stoke was in the former shire of the Beaumanoir family (although their property had been on the other side of the country), that my mother was bent on moving to our new home.

We children were wildly eager to see this Beaumanoir grand-aunt of whom we were so proud; and of whom my mother was fond of telling us a rather romantic story.

Miss Beaumanoir had been passionately devoted to her only brother, Sir Reginald, our maternal grandfather. When he was so embarrassed with money difficulties that the estate was in danger of being sold, she had placed her own fortune, twenty thousand pounds, in his hands—given it generously, utterly. In return, her brother had settled an old dower-house and demesne on her—The Barn where she still lived. But her sacrifice was in vain. A fire broke out in this very dower-house where they were then staying together—Sir Reginald, who was ill, died next day of exposure. The money, being in notes, had no doubt perished in the flames, for no trace of it was ever found. And the Beaumanoir estate went to the hammer.

Before coming to Stoke we pictured her vividly to each other as a snowy-haired but beautiful old lady, who would look “just stepped out of a picture”; always dressed in black velvet, and with a sad, sweet face, as befitted the last of her name. Then she would have an erect carriage; and perhaps carry a snuff-box, or a big fan, or a mysterious miniature concealed round her neck. Opinions on these latter points were divided.

The first time we beheld the real presence of our grand-aunt, however, was on this wise.

We were all assembled for breakfast one morning, at half-past nine o'clock, and prayers in the hall had just been ended, when a ring was heard at the entrance-door.

“Who can be there at this hour?” said my mother.

“It’s a beggar-woman, I think,” announced Beau, glancing at the window.

“Tell them to send her away immediately. Coming to the front door!—what will these tramps do next, I wonder?”

Beau disliked leaving his plate; but Bob had tumbled

at once off his chair, lustily shouting as he half-opened the door: "Mamma says you're to send away that beg——"

The last syllable died on his lips as he was smartly pushed aside by a strange little figure of a woman, who was answering to an expostulating footman: "Don't mind me, my good man: I'll announce myself:—I'm Miss Beaumanoir."

Our venerated grand-aunt! Every knife and fork was dropped as we all gazed, petrified. She certainly was a grotesque sight.

Standing at the door an instant as if to survey us all, we saw a dried little woman, who, like the Wandering Jew, might be imagined almost any age, her skin was so like parchment—while yet her eyes had a life and sharpness, and her small person an air of activity, quite uncanny to behold. As to her garments, they seemed all to be from a pawnshop, and none of them matching. A black straw bonnet adorned with artificial flowers was slipping off her head; a green veil; a blue parasol; an old black bombazeen dress, very short, below which appeared mysteriously the flounce of another thin black material trailing on the ground; while a tippet of the same transparent texture airily draped her shoulders, and was edged with narrow white crochet lace, through which meandered a penny red silk ribbon, giving colour to the outline. Such was Miss Beaumanoir's dress. She also wore bright violet gloves, so cheap that they seemed inclined to split at every seam, and the solitary button of each was tugged to bursting; notwithstanding which their owner was jauntily flourishing a little black bag.

My mother, who had only seen her aunt years ago, was inwardly horror-stricken, as we guessed, but to do her justice recovered bravely.

"Dear Aunt Bee—how *do* you do? What a surprise!—but I am so delighted," she gasped, advancing with much bravery to kiss her relation's cheek.

"And so this is you, Ada, I remember you as a little girl—yes; you're just what I expected," our grand-aunt coolly vouchsafed, taking our graceful mother by both hands and absolutely examining her at arm's-length. Then turning to father she added: "But is this your goodman? I wanted to see him especially. I've heard about you—oh, God bless you, I know by your face you and I will get on together,"—whereupon Aunt Bee threw her arms about his neck and gave him as his share an embrace with such gusto that, for the first time in our lives, we saw our father almost foolish and speechless; though Miss Beaumanoir kept kindly clapping his shoulder to enable him to recover.

"How late you fine people are!" she went on. "Why, I had my breakfast before six, and was off. Still, I think I'll join you all now, for I feel rather peckish." (Peckish—a word mother had strictly forbidden the boys to utter in her presence, as vulgar.)

We each thought how she must be wishing to lift her white hands in horror; but we hardly dared look up.

"Oh, do sit down! But how did you come; we heard no carriage?" faintly asked mother.

"Carriage, my dear! I walked on my own two feet. Why, it's only ten miles here from The Barn; and, if I'd driven, you'd have had to give stable-room to my old pony longer than you'd care, perhaps."

"Not at all. As long as ever you liked, and the longer the better," cried father gallantly. "But I hope that means you intend to stay yourself with us, anyhow."

"Exactly so. Oh, you and I will get on together like a house on fire, I see," replied Miss Bee, nodding at

him with highly pleased becks and smiles. "Yes, I've come to stay two or three days."

"That's right," heartily went on father. "And where's your luggage? It's to follow, of course; or can I send for it anywhere?"

"Luggage! Here's all my luggage—this little hand-bag. Why, I've gone to Russia and back with just this. What more do you want?—a tooth-brush and a hair-brush and a night——"

"But your dresses!" absolutely ejaculated my mother, cutting short with real dismay her aunt's list of travelling necessities.

"My dresses!" I am sorry to relate it: but our grand-aunt literally jumped up and down on the floor while displaying her bombazeen with both hands. "*They're all on me, my dears.* This is my day-gown, as you see; and here's my dinner one underneath" (lifting the top skirt to show the thin mystery below); "and I just slipped my Sunday silk under that again, for fear you might happen to have a garden party or something smart" (picking up the dinner-skirt to reveal a third layer of garments, the last one being so far from smart, and a yard deep in dust after sweeping the Queen's highway for ten miles, that we young ones forgot our manners, and fairly screamed with laughter).

"Oh, you brats!—they're all laughing at me. I can tell you my gown was good enough for the Duchess of Westshire, where I was staying last week, so it may just do for you."

We all knew Aunt Bee visited the finest of folk on the most intimate of terms, so were every one respectably silent.

"However," she added, contemplating the undermost skirt again—"I own, it is dusty, but no matter.

I'll just take a run round some of the meadows with you boys, and that will clean it. I don't like girls half as well—never did; and Miss Brown there is too fine for me, I'm afraid. She's the very picture of yourself, Ada, my dear. And this next little witch with the mouse-coloured hair" (meaning me) "looks as if she used her big eyes more than her tongue; you're a chrysalis still, child; no one could say how you'll turn out. There's an ugly division and a handsome division in the family, I see; I always belonged to the uglies myself, but I like looking at the beauties."

From which last words, it will be seen our grand-aunt Bee had already descried we were a mixed family of swans and geese. My mother, Alice, and Beau, of course, were all swans; father, poor Bob, and myself belonged hopelessly to the mean class. Little Rose was the only doubtful member of the family; since she joined to most exquisite colouring the funniest little turn-up nose in the world, with an upper lip so short and impudent it always showed her snowy little teeth.

As to myself, I felt ill-proportioned in mind and body; with more of limb and hair than I could dispose of gracefully, but too little colour and self-confidence. I was shy, brooding, with vague ambitions of soul beginning to stir, yet only common-place gifts to justify them — *growing*, in fact, and unformed. My only comfort was, that my father always called me his "ugly duckling."

CHAPTER IV.

I WAS very ill indeed that time. My mother nursed me herself with the most painstaking care, and I well remember my great surprise at waking up once to find her crying over me. It seemed, in her, such an impossibility.

Yet as soon as I began to recover, she became again as composed, almost cool in her manner, as ever; so that I lay in respectful quiet and monotonous semi-darkness till my father would appear like a sunbeam always flickering between our two sick-rooms, bringing with him a fresh breeze of outside, as it were—cheery words, little items of news from the garden, or farmyard, or woods, and easy laughter.

One day when Bob and I had both met down-stairs for the first time, curiously comparing our white faces and respective green goggles, our parents entered with that pleased possessive air which means unmistakably good news.

"Here, invalids! here's good luck for you," cried father, flourishing a letter; "my old friend, Mrs. Gladman, invites you both down to Dartmoor for change of air. I declare I wish I was going too; it would make me feel a boy again."

We piped for joy, in still weak delight.

"There is *nobody* I like so much as Mrs. Gladman," I exclaimed, with enthusiasm.

"Except Jack Gladman," corrected Bob with equal ardour.

Jack was Mrs. Gladman's only son, and she was a widow.

Our mother looked at us rather critically during this

outburst of ecstasy. Mrs. Gladman was the only one among her husband's old friends whom she ever welcomed to our home. My father considered Mrs. Gladman to have the chief place among his old friends; my mother gave her perhaps the lowest place among *her* friends; and yet, almost against her will, respected, and felt attached to, that good soul and warmest of hearts.

It was a lovely spring evening when we first saw Dartmoor's rampart of hills rising before us, moated by the valleys at its base. Perhaps it was from having been cooped in darkened rooms so long; perhaps from fatigue of a long drive through Devonshire lanes, that hid all view entirely except for a sudden tantalising peep through occasional gates—but, certainly, when we at last mounted a long hill and then descending the further side looked down into a small valley, seeing great oak-woods clothing the hill-sides, and a trout stream brawling out of a rocky little gorge to wind through cowslip meadows, whilst midmost tall trees clustered round a brown mass of homely, half-seen buildings — we seemed entering a moorland Paradise.

"That's Wheatfield Farm yonder, and Mrs. Gladman hur be coming to the gate," announced our driver, pointing with the butt of his whip.

But we had guessed it already.

That delightful, long, old farmhouse could belong to none other than she; with its trim garden in front, and narrow paved walks. Its red-tiled or thatched roofs overhung to the left the fresh green lane down which we came. To right, the great farm orchard stretched all pink and white up the hill on the other side, till it was folded in by the noble oak-woods that crowned the high ground on this side of the valley. Yes! these delightful possessions rightly belonged to that best of women.

Besides, there was she herself standing at the wooden gate, with a broad smile of welcome on her broad, kindly face; with the self-same brown hair worn so thick and low on her forehead, we had sometimes irreverently declared it looked just like a beautiful wig.

And a little further down was Jack Gladman, riding up the lane to meet us on his white pony, in a wide straw hat, rough tweed suit, and gaiters. He was very little older than Beau, who somewhat despised his clodhopper upbringing; yet here, on his own ground, he looked quite a young squire and a man already. Any further observations were stifled in Mrs. Gladman's large embrace, as she took us both first literally to her heart and then led us in to her hearth. To us, Wheatfield Farm seemed then a most delectable abode, with no troublesome carpets and fine furniture, but clean dark floors that we could romp over—sweetness, if economy, everywhere. It was a very old house, and had been in the possession of the Gladman family for generations. Once it had been thought quite a handsome gentleman's dwelling, before city luxury spread into the country; but it had stood still like its farm-loving owners, and now was surpassed by far newer houses, whose more pretentious families looked down on the Gladmans. Still as it was later improved, and may thus be hereafter described, I will only say that we then found it a home of early rising, plain food, plenty, and health.

What a happy idle life we led in that old Devonshire farmhouse! We scampered into the moor for miles on ponies; and climbed all the tors near and far; seeing always fresh ranges of hill beyond hill overstepping each other, all viewed by us as so many fortresses of nature to be stormed by our eager selves and taken.

Or else Bob would follow for the livelong day close

on Jack Gladman's heels, watching the latter oversee his farm-men from six in the fresh morning till six again at restful eve. Or Jack would be breaking in his young colts himself, delighting in the risk and trouble. Or he might have to be whole afternoons in the oak-woods, seeing about barking the trees.

Meanwhile, I was being initiated in dairy mysteries by Mrs. Gladman; and soon knew how to make butter Devonshire fashion, and scald cream, to my own satisfaction—and, at worst, her amusement as well as mine.

However real all this work must have been to the widow with a large farm and household to manage, and Jack too young to take the full cares of life on his own shoulders, to us it was like playing at being in Arcadia. It seemed such a sweet, simple life; a pastoral idyll. As such, it might almost have faded from my memory by now, like a pleasant dream, but for one acquaintance—whose appearance in the narrow circle of my then young life deserves recalling.

"There is to be an otter-hunt up the river to-morrow. Pole is bringing over his hounds, mother. And, I say, can you get up a breakfast in time for any of the fellows?" cried Jack Gladman one evening, bursting hot and breathless into the parlour, where Mrs. Gladman was darning some very old and fine table-linen with her own fingers, since none of the maids would have taken such pride and pains in the task.

"Why, we just *must*, dear," replied his mother, lifting her placid face with such a willing smile and air of fond motherly pride in her boy, that no wonder he came to her for help and advice on every occasion.

"That's right. You're the most useful woman in the world," exclaimed Jack, catching her round the waist and

giving her a resounding kiss, which embrace made Bob and me somehow feel uncomfortable, yet admiring. Why could we never treat our mother in a familiar way? "And I say, old Fulke will come in for it, too— isn't that luck? He's just come down by Exeter way for a week's holiday; got a lift in William Collins's spring-cart. Dear old Fulke! ain't I just glad he's come down?"

"Did you not tell him to come and see me this evening, foolish boy?"

"I did—and he said at first, of course, he was coming; but then he thought this first evening he would not leave his poor mother. . . . I told him that Pleasance and Bob were here," went on Jack, with a constrained look at us, "and, you see, he doesn't much care to meet strangers."

"Ah, yes—I can understand that. Poor Fulke!"

Mother and son exchanged a meaning look; which, as I was staring in their direction, I saw, and naturally wondered at. What had we done, or this Mr. Fulke done, that he should dislike the sight of fellow human beings; especially such harmless ones as Bob and myself? Oh, no doubt he was a misanthrope; on which I disliked him, beforehand, for disliking us.

"Who is Mr. Fulke?" I asked. And Mrs. Gladman answered, rather hesitatingly:

"He's a great friend of ours, my dear, and he's a clerk in a bank."

A bank clerk, and come in Collins the grocer's spring-cart! I did not think much of this friend.

"Now, Pleasance," cried Jack, laying a heavy hand boisterously on either of my shoulders, "are you game to be up by six, and down at Chagford Bridge; or are you too fine a young lady? The hounds will most likely

go up Holy Street to Gidleigh Park ; and then we may be off upon the moor ; or heaven knows where ! ”

“ Oh, I’ll go. It will be glorious ! But, Jack, *do* take away those great hands of yours. I’m not fine, and I never was, but I don’t like to be teased,” was my answer, half-ecstatic, half-exasperated ; trying to wriggle away from the expected, endearing horse-play to which Jack in good-fellowship loved to treat me.

“ Yes, Jack ; you really should not tease Pleasance so ; she will soon be quite a young lady,” added his mother, who always protected me. “ You always remind me of a mastiff dog gambolling round a gray kitten. A great big fellow like you should be more gentle.”

Why she said a gray kitten more than a white or any other she did not add ; probably as less pretty, I surmised resignedly. But there was no doubt, when looking at Mrs. Gladman’s honest eyes beaming upon her boy, that, to her, he was as big as any Saul and as fair of face as a David. Nevertheless, in sober truth he had now stopped growing at five feet eleven ; had the healthiest dumpling visage in which any young Englishman could show red and white ; twinkling eyes ; a commonplace nose ; white teeth ; and the downy dawn of what would no doubt become respectable mutton-chop whiskers, like his father’s before him, in due course of time.

CHAPTER V.

Ven. "My friend Piscator, you have kept time with my thoughts, for the sun is just rising, and I myself just now come to this place, and the dogs have just now put down an otter. Look down at the bottom of the hill there in that meadow, chequered with waterlilies and ladysmocks : there you may see what work they make : look ! look ! you may see all busy. Men and dogs, dogs and men, all busy."—*IZAACK WALTON'S Compleat Angler.*

BOB and I hardly slept that night, we were so fearful of being late for the otter-hunt. Before four in the gray morning, I heard a tapping at my door, and springing out of bed in terror—though it seemed as if I had only just fallen asleep—let in a head and an owl's face, in which concern and sleep were mingling.

"I'm sure," said Bob, "*they've forgotten to call us !*"

It seemed his watch had been over-wound ; or else had stopped of pure malice ; which it often did, he ruefully explained, for by day it required being shaken pretty often to keep it going.

In spite of fears, however, when Jack brought his dog-cart to the gate we were ready. We had gulped down breakfast in the kitchen, where Mrs. Gladman, herself as neatly dressed and unflurried as if the hour was quite usual, was up, helping her mainstay, Mary Munch, to frizzle bacon and boil coffee.

Away we sped in the gray twilight.

"I hope we're not late. Luckily there's a long hill to go down," said young Gladman, lightly touching up his mare with the whip ; and downhill we spun at a pace that made me giddy looking ahead, and that none but a Devonshire-bred animal would take as a matter of course.

Through a sleeping village, down a narrow lane. "There they are," cried Jack, pointing to a group gathered on the bridge over the brown Teign. "There is my friend Fulke ; and that's Pole, the master, just going to put his hounds into the water. We're in the nick of time."

"Hooroo !" jubileed Bob lustily ; brandishing a long leaping pole behind us, to the danger of our heads, as we drew up.

"Be quiet, you March hare," called out Jack ; and several of the men, to my surprise, laughed out, and hailed Bob with "Hallo, young Brown !" and called him "March hare," too. It was my home name for him, picked up by John, and now evidently widespread. How Bob had already got to know them, since coming to Wheatfield, was a mystery. But there *never* was such a boy for making friends !

There was no time to ask him, for already the horn had sounded and the hounds taken eagerly to the water, swimming and wading up the clear brown stream that ran between the dewy meadows, all gold-spangled with marsh marigolds.

There seemed about twelve or fourteen gentlemen in the hunt, for they wore the same costume as Jack : navy-blue knickerbocker suits, red or blue stockings, and striped caps. Most of them carried leaping-poles, as did two large-waisted, laughing cousins of Jack's among the several girls of the party. Of course, there was the usual following of truant urchins and idlers attracted from their farm or village work—but these indeed were few and of small account.

"Are you going to look after us, Jack ?" called out his cousins in healthy, large voices.

"Not I ! You are much better able to take care of yourselves. Keep close behind me, Pleasance," was the

only answer they got ; as, vaulting a stile, Jack went up the first meadow at a sling-trot, just looking back with one satisfied eye, occasionally, to make sure I was at his heels.

Some few of the more ardent men and boys had taken to the water, and were splashing at a rattling pace up-stream ; among them Bob, who hardly set foot on dry ground that day. We had gone across all the meadows without pausing to take breath. Over walls, through gaps, I scrambled, almost always without accepting Jack's help, so that he soon scarcely seemed to think it necessary to heed me. My cheeks were glowing ; my hair, that had been tidily coiled up that morning to keep it out of my way, was flying in a veil behind ; and I hardly knew how I felt except that it was delicious to run, yet grateful to stop just a few seconds !—when we found ourselves somehow among woods, and that the hounds were at fault, while two sharp little terriers were being sent up a suspicious covered drain, to ask if the otter which we had found but not *seen* might be there.

We had paused in Holy Street glen ; and how lovely it was ! The river twisted and hurried foaming round the gray rocks in its bed, while the rising sun played on it through the tall trees overhead, and the opposite oak-wood was knee-deep in masses of blue-bells shading away into violet. We sat down to rest and breathe a moment on some of the many-lichened, mossy boulders around, the supposed traces of the Druids' holy way that still gives its name to the glen. Then came a fresh sound of the horn ; on and on again ; still down by the river's edge, through copses that snipped our faces, stumbling among rocks, out into young wheat-fields, into fresh difficulties, jumping, climbing, and racing at a pace to which that of the meadows had been mere amusement.

Now we were at Lee Bridge, the meeting of the waters, where the North Teign came down from Gidleigh. But we took the South stream on the left; and here we met trees, ferny coverts, rocks, and obstacles that piled and tangled themselves in our path ever more and more. Undaunted, still we scrambled upwards and onwards.

Some now lagged behind, seeing no more of that day's run. Our numbers were visibly smaller as we streamed in twos or threes through the bushes. Most were more silent of laugh and chaff, and settled to earnest work now; all but Bob, who, streaming with water from his cap down (for he had fallen head foremost several times), seemed to have jokes and laughter to the end. For me, my heart was beating so hard it seemed ready to burst; slight mists came before my eyes; yet, while Bob ran on, so would I.

A horrible wall suddenly seemed to rise in the wood before us. Young Gladman and most of the men splashed at once up to their knees in the river which met it, so got past, but my courage failed at sight of the deep water. Oh! why had Jack forsaken me? The last of all, with sore fingers, I somehow clambered to the top of the wall, and beheld a tall stranger waiting below.

"Jump!" he cried, stretching up his arms, into which I jumped, and was carefully set on my feet. "Take breath now," he ejaculated; but on a determined shake of my head he caught my hand and ran a few yards; dragging me. Then there was a sudden check. The otter had been headed, and the hounds were foiled.

A rest! Oh, how sweet was rest! My craven heart almost wished they might never find that scent again.

The woods were in their freshest beauty around us, but little had we recked of that. I looked round to thank the unknown; but he had vanished in the group of otter-hunters.

A whimper or two, the horn sounds as gaily as ever, and they are back again; but more slowly.

This time I was aware of a pair of strong arms hoisting me up to that hated wall, and the same voice as before ordered—"Stay there." Foolish pride urged self-dependence; so calling back, "No, thank you! I don't want help," I jumped unaided, fell, and bruising my foot on a stone, hobbled on with sobbing breath, never looking behind me. Past the meeting rivers, and up the other Teign; over more level ground; through more woods; past exquisite bits of river scenery, titanic boulders flung in the bed of the stream; into a wooded rocky gorge . . . down again a bit, up again! . . .

At last we got to an almost impossible part. My foot was so painful, that, seeing some of the men spring across stream on what seemed easy stepping-stones, I followed. One spring to a round stone wet with spray, then with slipping feet to another and another, and then I found myself on a giant flat boulder exactly amid-stream, and just where the water was deepest.

Luckless Pleasance! I had mistaken the stones and was left, hindmost of all, and utterly helpless.

The shouts of the hunt came each second fainter down the gorge; no sound answered my calls upon Jack and Bob. In a few minutes I was alone.

Now this may not seem at first hearing so bad. Nevertheless, on looking down, the dark pool on the further side might be six foot deep, as I fearfully judged—having some experience—and I could not swim. There had been a spate very lately, and the water rushed

so eagerly, like a brown, living thing, round those treacherous stepping-stones, that they disliked me more and more. Besides—from my rock I *could not* jump back to them !

No matter, Bob would miss me, and surely Jack. Till then I would nurse my wounded foot; be at rest—a glad rest, drawing my breath still hard—and look around me; the scene was so exquisite.

What if I never saw the tip of the tail of that poor otter we had been so cruelly chasing? My enthusiasm had vanished; the sun had risen so high among the trees, it seemed to me the hour must be getting quite late, though it was barely nine o'clock; and, to confess the truth, besides utter fatigue there was a curious feeling creeping over me that might mean hunger.

With my brown hair falling like a veil about me, and the sunlight striking down upon my red petticoat and fawn-coloured short skirt and jacket, I began to dream of myself as an Undine, with the sentimentalism of my age. An Undine in strong, laced-up boots, and a cricketer's cap lent me by Jack crowning my "wealth of tresses." But I clasped my hands round my knees and unconsciously glowered around quite appropriately; wishing for the help that neither woods nor stones could give.

On either side, the trees rose in a green wall, clothing the sides of the gorge. There was only a narrow space left for the revivifying blue sunlight to pierce between, and sparkle on the clear brown water that hurried and twisted and foamed like an element of life round the white boulders piled in chaos in the narrow bed of the stream. Here midmost I was perched, glad as any midge to feel the sun—a single human speck in that solitude. Here and there in the clear shallows I could

see the gravel shining like rare pebbles. The woods around just bursting into leaf were like a brown network all flecked, spangled, and, as it were, dropping with green.

And still I was alone. The birds were trilling up the gorge in scattered song; and oh! if on the bank now what skirtfuls I could have picked of red-campion, delicate lady's-smocks, and dearest yellow primroses; there were beds of trembling wood anemones, too, and white satin star-flowers in profusion.

Spring, the sweet spring, is the year's pleasant king;
Then blooms each thing, then maids dance in a ring.

Flash! flash! there jumped the trout in the water, showing their silver sides. A wagtail seemed to laugh at me, flirting its saucy tail, as verily it might, for here sat Undine still, and yet there was no knight——!

Suddenly a human voice called, "What is the matter?" and there was a man in the correct otter-hunt costume standing on the bank; a gentleman most certainly, if not a knight.

Then, seeing what *was* the matter, without more ado he jumped into the water, which soon reached above his knees.

CHAPTER VI.

"We twa hae paidlit i' the burn."

I **was** last left still seated a prisoner on my great rock of unfeeling granite in the middle of the Teign. But my unknown deliverer was wading towards me.

He seemed a man of few words ; for all he said in answer to my shamefaced explanations as to how I came in such plight, was to bid me hold tightly round his neck. Then taking me up by one arm, he steadied himself by his leaping-pole. But noticing me wince as he placed me safe on the bank, he asked with a different tone of interest :

"Are you hurt, too ? I was afraid of that, when you would jump down that big wall by yourself."

"So it was you?" I exclaimed with eager recognition ; "I thought it was, at every step you took in the water, but I was not sure."

"Yes ; it was I that gave you a hand, if that is what you mean?" he said, more *dryly* (to make a mild joke !) than the dripping state of his nether person seemed to me to warrant. "I thought you had hurt yourself ; and that was how I came to notice that you were not with us when we got out on the moor there," and he nodded up the ravine.

"But did you come back on purpose to look for me ? *How* kind of you to stop in the middle of the hunt !" I exclaimed shyly, but in a voice overflowing with gratitude, whilst I looked even more thanks. And now that I had really courage to look at him, he was really a very handsome man—old, quite old, and not a boy like Jack.

"Kind to prefer helping a suffering human being to making a poor otter suffer !" he said, with a short laugh, that raised a short brown moustache showing even better teeth than Jack's.

"But my brother—a boy in the water—Bob—did he not think of me ?" I shyly asked, with injured sisterly feeling ; while secretly trying to give my loose hair and little red and blue cap a more prim and *comme-il-faut* appearance,

"If you mean a fair young fellow that Jack Gladman and the others called the March hare, he seemed so perfectly mad after the otter you ought to forgive him," said my new friend, smiling as if despite himself. "I am an older hand at it; but Jack might have looked after you himself rather more. His mother will scold him for it, I should think."

"What! do you know Mrs. Gladman too?" (joyfully).

"*Know her!* She and Wheatfield Farm and Jack are among my oldest and dearest friends and memories; I should rather think I do know her—well. But we are wasting time, and how are you to get back to her? I had better carry you to the nearest cottage; and then we'll see what's next best."

Against this I protested, and did walk bravely a few yards, hurting myself at every step, till my protector suddenly said in a kind scolding voice:

"Now, don't be such a silly child;" and so caught me up and bore me through the trees to a cottage near, whether I would or no.

Secretly I would, for the pain had been sharp. Besides, evidently there was no use remonstrating with a man who used so few words and always had his own way. One felt he would be master; it was in his face and in his voice, or so I thought, being still almost a child in my ideas. If I was right it was woman's instinct, for he had not a frowning brow, or stern, deep-set eyes, or a lip that betrayed unfaltering resolution, or anything especially determined in his appearance; and Bob said afterwards, on being privately told my opinion, that it was all bosh! and he—my deliverer—was the most good-natured fellow in the world, though very likely he wouldn't stand nonsense,

Anyway, at the cottage he made me unlace my boot myself, as from modesty I strictly forbade his doing so. And then he borrowed a rough, big pony fresh from the harrow, its head being still adorned with blinkers and rope-reins.

"Now, can you lend me something by way of a saddle for the young lady?" went on the voice of my friend outside. Meanwhile I sat in the cottage kitchen on a settle, and alternately marvelled at my new acquaintance, and at the queer German scriptural prints on the walls. Some Autolycus must have found them good pedlar's ware, for every cottage parlour round the country-side was hideous with them.

"Oh, my dear crature," answered the cottage good-wife in easy Devonshire tones, without seeming to disturb herself in the least, "what would us do with a saddle? Hur'll have to sit on hur" (this last meaning the mare) "barebacked just."

"Come now, look here; I've unharnessed the pony myself, and you've had no trouble, so get me a clean sack like a good soul—do now."

"Bless us, a sack! Johnny, Jemmy, Susan, where is the potato sack to, anyway?"

"Don't trouble yourselves. *I've* got one;" and returning for me, my friend in need coolly routed out a new sack from behind the meal-barrel. He first put it, and then myself, triumphantly atop of the vulgar steed; seized the reins himself. So—walking close beside me lest I should slip—along the lanes we jogged back to Wheatfield Farm, a strange pair. In after days the memory of our homeward conversation all faded away. Only I knew that, short as my companion's remarks were, they were so full of kindly pity and purpose that soon I found myself, to my own surprise, talking to him

as if he had been an old friend of the family, or some elder cousin, of whom I was not in the least afraid.

It was a long way back ; and once or twice I checked myself, ashamed of my ease and familiarity. But then my friend had been so kind all morning, and was taking such good care of me on the pony. Besides, he knew the Gladmans well, so that he must be "nice." And not daring to ask his name, I began to spin all sorts of romantic surmises about him in my brain, till it was indeed a tangle.

Coming round the bend of the lane, we saw Mrs. Gladman busy tidying her garden under the encircling shade of a straw hat the size of a cart-wheel ; and Mary Munch—her stout, wholesome cook, dairy-woman, and goodness knows what not besides !—absolutely standing idle, with a sun-bonnet tilted over her eyes, and her bare arms akimbo.

"Why, yonder's Missy and Mr. Fulke," she called out loudly. "Whatever has happened to hur?"

"What ! Mr. Fulke !—I am so glad to have you back again among us. But . . . Pleasance, child, *is* anything the matter ?" cried Mrs. Gladman in her turn, hurrying to open the white gate for us. Then, as we both explained my light accident, she caressed me, and said, reassured : "Well, I am glad you were with Mr. Fulke, at all events. You could not be in better hands."

They had put me down on a garden seat carefully, and only as the name was repeated did it flash through my mind with bitter disappointment that my good-looking stranger was—only the bank clerk.

"Stay and have some brexfass now, Mr. Fulke," urged Mary Munch familiarly, as I slowly recovered from my mental shock ; "I was looking up the lane for

Master Jack and the rest, thinking you'd all be as hungry as hunters sure-ly."

"And she can do nothing, she is so distressed at her grand breakfast being in there uneaten," laughed Mrs. Gladman.

"Can't—thank you. My poor mother, you know," lowering his voice. "This is just the time she would like me to help her outside, to sit in the garden."

"Ah, well! but then you will come this evening to tea, at least?"

To which last the visitor nodded thanks and went off, lifting his hat to me before I could summon any fit form of words in which to express my gratitude to him.

By-and-by, after my foot had been dressed with lily-leaves, and I was settled comfortably on the wooden window-seat in the parlour, having had some of Mary Munch's "fine brexfass," Mrs. Gladman said, with a cordial smile, as if sure of my ready sympathy:

"Come now, let us talk about Mr. Fulke. Don't you think him very handsome, Pleasance? He always reminds me of a young sun-god."

I secretly smiled in my imagined superiority; for my good old friend had a still romantic heart within her stout body, as I had discovered.

"Well; I can't say that I exactly thought him a Baldur the Beautiful, though I am sure he is a—very nice young man," I flippantly answered, tossing my head that was humble enough at home as the family goose, but here, being cockered by unusual caresses, Jack's big-boyish devotion, and his mother's fond admiration, had become quite impudent.

What a conceited young hussy my dear motherly hostess must have thought me! But perhaps she knew

the tiresome airs of little bread-and-butter misses which seem a general phase of their existence, since she always bore mine with an angel's patience. Looking at her, by-and-by, I saw by her silence she was hurt. She had left the sunny garden and her pleasant morning's work outside to sit in the dull brown parlour with a lame chit of a girl, and in return was almost snubbed about her favourite Mr. Fulke.

Feeling something of this, in secret penitence, I hazarded the remark: "Isn't it rather a pity, as Mr. Fulke is so pleasant, that he should be only a bank clerk?" My idea of banks was hitherto that of our small county town one, between the baker's and the haberdasher's shops.

Mrs. Gladman stopped knitting Jack's heather hose, and stared at me in amazement.

"Bless my heart, child! Why, the bank he is in is one of the oldest in England or *anywhere*; and requires the highest interest to get into. Then he may become a junior partner, and think what a fortune he would retire upon some day. I only wish my boy had such a chance! . . . But there—it is not given to every one to have such a strong, self-denying nature, and give up all the field-sports and pleasant society that a young man is so fond of. Perhaps Jack will be happier on his little patrimony, like his fathers before him, though nowadays it is no such great inheritance."

Knowing that the Gladmans' estate, though retaining its old-fashioned name of farm, ranked respectably among those of the first squires around, whilst the family themselves were acknowledged to be of older origin than most—I was doubly surprised in turn.

"And has Mr. Fulke been accustomed then to field-sports and good society?" I pursued, still half-incredu-

lous ; pulling the mantle of my mother's manner about me, and my voice betraying the fact.

"Don't make a mistake, Pleasance. He is certainly reduced to poverty, through no fault of his ; but he can boast of a far older and better family than either you or I."

"Then is it not a pity he did not choose one of the professions instead ?" said the foolish spirit possessing my childish mind, as I unconsciously mimicked my mother. "The army or the Church."

"Your father was not the worse man for being in trade, I think," returned Mrs. Gladman, with such dry significance that the ashamed blood rushed to my cheeks, and quick salt tears to my eyes.

Of course our father was *always* perfect, as every one knew. But now he had become quite a country gentleman ; and though he was ready enough to talk of his past life, our mother deftly turned the subject often—or would intimate to us young ones afterwards, with a flattering praise we lovingly accepted, that he had been a brilliant exception among his fellow-workers ; but that she would not willingly see a son of hers go back to the class from which her husband had raised himself by his distinguished abilities.

Knowing this, as an old family friend, Mrs. Gladman laid her hand tenderly on my arm.

"Perhaps you were arguing for argument's sake, dear ; young people sometimes do."

Demonstrations of affection were supposed ridiculous in our family ; save always those of my father. But his were all of a most unsentimental nature, such as catching us girls and scrubbing our softer faces with his rough whiskers, alternately with kisses. Nevertheless, I stole out my hand to stroke that of my excellent friend, which completed our restored good understanding.

Then she told me a good deal about Mr. Fulke. How that he had a mother living in a pretty cottage half a mile off, up at the glen's mouth—one which I had admired at a distance. This poor lady was slowly dying of a painful illness that had darkened her latter life, and made even her son's companionship at times a burden to them both. Yet his devotion to her, whenever he could get a few spare days, was beautiful; and he denied himself in all things for her sake. "I have known him walk out here from Exeter, and be ill, footsore, and dusty—just for that reason, not that he would ever say so!" exclaimed Mrs. Gladman, ending her panegyric. (I felt so glad now the poor man *had* had that lift yesterday in the grocer's cart.)

After this, that evening I received Mr. Fulke so graciously when he came before tea, that he sat down beside me with quite an air of good comradeship.

"Ah! I can see by your manner that poor foot is better, Miss Pleasance. It was paining you when I left the farm this morning. I saw that; for you could not speak to me."

He looked at me so honestly with kindly pity, that my heart was full of shame, remembering why I would not thank him then; and I looked down.

"Tell me," he went on, "have I not got your name right—Pleasance? It struck me this morning as so quaint and pretty."

"I am glad you like it," I murmured, feeling pleased, for at home my mother sighed secretly, I knew, over the Brown cognomen.

"Yes; and it just suits her," said Mrs. Gladman, patting my shoulder, as she approached to call us to tea.

Then Jack insisted on carrying me. He quite

bothered me with his sorrow and contrition ; but he did not lift me nearly so comfortably as my previous bearer.

Tea was a noble meal at the farm ; very different from our former schoolroom milk - and - water diet. Mrs. Gladman gloried in her snowy table-linen and the brightness of her silver tea and coffee service. Then there was always such a great round of pressed beef for Jack and Bob to whet their appetites on ; and the home-made bread was so excellent ; the butter and cream surpassing all I have ever tasted since ; besides the great fresh currant-cakes and home-made gooseberry jam that Bob and I devoured nightly between us.

At this excellent repast our new guest laughingly described how I had distinguished myself that morning in the otter-hunt.

"I saw a young Atalanta come flying past me, Mrs. Gladman, taking every fence like a bird."

"Jack's cousins ran better than I did, for they kept up all day," I interposed, in the interests of justice, though highly flattered.

"What? Emmy and Bessie—oh, they have got such big feet, no wonder they can cover the ground," scoffed Jack ; "but," looking at me with silly partiality, like the dear booby he was, "how your tiny little ones can fly along at such a pace is a wonder !"

"And a nice sort of goose she was to go and stick on a rock in a hop-o'-my-thumb river like that," put in brother Bob, stuffing his mouth full. He considered the sort of adulation going on very hurtful to a sisterly nature, so felt bound to counteract it.

Mrs. Gladman also thinking the conversation too personal for me, turned it.

"Well, Bob, how would you like to give up thoughts of the army and live in Devonshire with us ?"

"Wouldn't I just?" said the youth. "Only my mother says, I must be a soldier. So long as there is peace I'll like it jolly well, I dare say; but I do *not* see the fun of being shot."

"You are more honest than brave, then," said the stranger, with an amused laugh.

"Oh, I'm just like lots of other fellows. (Some more jam, please.) There's an old pensioner with a wooden leg in the village near our place, Stoke—he's called Jerry Plant—and he told me when the bullets were flying round him he'd have liked to run but for shame's sake, and the men round wouldn't have let him get away. 'Right you are, Jerry,' said I, 'and I know I'd have liked to race you.'"

"And is old Jerry alive still?" asked Mr. Fulke, with roused interest. "I mean does he still adorn your home, Stoke?"

"Oh, he's all alive. But he's not at Stoke itself. That's our own place, and the best one in England, too," quoth Bob easily.

"*It is* the dearest old home in the world!" I warmly added, both of us rushing into our favourite subject, till I noticed that Mrs. Gladman was troubled; and remembered we might be recalling to the guest how his family had lost their estate.

"Pray don't stop them. It does me good to listen to such warm affection for their home," he said, in an undertone to Mrs. Gladman.

However, Jack turned the talk, blundering in *à propos* of nothing: "Well, if I was in any man's shoes, I'd as soon as any one else be you, Fulke. Still, though I'll never have a fortune, nor make one on the Farm, perhaps for a stupid chap like me I'm as happy as I am."

His older friend smiled kindly on the honest young fellow, and quoted—

“Happy the man whose wish and care
A few *paternal* acres bound,
Content to breathe his native air
In his own ground.”

That evening, and the following ones, what merry times we had with Jack and his friend at casino, commerce, and such good old games; whilst Mrs. Gladman laughed at us, sewing placidly under the lamp. But our days were soon made even more pleasant by Mr. Fulke, who had promised to give Bob lessons in fishing—himself being the most accomplished angler far or near, as we learnt. So, my foot being soon better, I must needs go with them too.

What merry forenoons down the glen were those we spent, lunching under the birches and rowans, and then rambling homewards lazily while Mr. Fulke fished upon his way! Bob carried the basket with admiring eyes, and I was laden with great sprays of hawthorn-blossom. It was the time when

The palm and May make country-houses gay;
Lambs frisk and play, the shepherds pipe all day,
And we hear aye birds tune this merry lay—
Cuckoo, jug-jug, pu-we, tu-witta-woo.

Jack, meanwhile, used to pity himself for having to attend some large spring fairs, which he vowed were dull instead of our society, for he loved Mr. Fulke dearly: but Bob absolutely worshipped him like a devoted dog.

Then Mr. Fulke went away. And although he had used to say so few words, his large presence seemed to have brought a sunlight of soul into the old brown parlour, we were so dull without him. But then we

likewise said good-bye; and once more saw Stoke woods welcoming us.

Of course, after our parents' caresses and remarks on our improved condition were done, our brethren boisterously demanded full particulars of our visit to Arcadia. Bob, thereupon, burst into blaring praise of our new friend, whose virtues he could have trumpeted for hours unwearied; but I, without quite knowing why, had become shy of doing the same now I was home again.

My mother, listening, asked me, however, some details as to Bob's last hero; and then lifting her eyebrows ever so slightly with languid gentleness of manner pronounced:

"One of Mrs. Gladman's *protégés*, I see. Good soul! she is always taking up people who have come down in the world. He can't be anything very much; so I hope you were not too intimate with him, young as you are."

Too intimate? My heart sank, remembering how freely Bob and I had babbled to that bank clerk, till he must have known about Stoke and its charms and our pursuits almost as well as ourselves. And he had always drawn us out more and more—unless we came near revealing too much of home life; then, I remembered he had always checked our impulsive tongues.

In time I did forget Mr. Fulke; yet, till I had grown up and grown out of those pleasant memories, he remained my ideal of a good son, fisherman, clerk, and loyal gentleman.

CHAPTER VII.

WE have all grown much, much older, since last I described our happy visit to Dartmoor in our golden age.

And now a great family event is agitating our circle. Alice is engaged to be married, to one of the matrimonial big prizes of last season—the rich Sir Dudley Digges.

It is after a London season—my first season, which seemed to me all hurry, racket, some delights and perhaps more disappointment; and in which nobody fell in love with me, nor I with anybody so far as I knew; though secretly longing to have met two or three once-seen partners again—after all this we were once more at dear Stoke, to prepare for Alice's wedding.

Sir Dudley was expected to arrive in the afternoon, and there was to be a great family gathering to meet him.

Beau had foregone some last days at Cowes to be present. Having set the seal of his approval upon Alice's union, to my mother's great delight; for she looked on her first-born as an oracle of the world of fashion. He was now a "young man about town;" not knowing what work he should do, in spite of my father's recommendations, nor much wishing to discover any; rather fine—but still very kind to us all. Bob had come gaily from his crammers, dry with knowledge, he said, and thirsting for fun. Rose, who had been left in the country with her governess, was wild to see a wedding. These two last were now plying me with questions, as to how it all happened? which I was unsuccessfully trying to parry. For the truth was that I had felt a certain fastidious regret about "losing" my

sister, and to Sir Dudley too, which Alice herself had promptly laughed me into suppressing.

It was before five o'clock tea-time ; and we happened to have the dear old drawing-room to ourselves. Stoke was like Adam and Eve's bower that summer. Flowers, flowers were everywhere, from those beautifully painted on the brown-panelled walls to the rarest of orchids massed in the delicate china jars or fairy-like ideas in Venetian glass which our mother's exquisite taste had disposed around. She had delightfully modernised this old-fashioned room. The colours were all of the richest but subdued shades. Generations (of former owners) had amassed with loving pride the beautiful objects around ; Venetian chandeliers, Eastern hangings, old miniatures, matchless ivory and ebony furniture, stiff and fragile ; but for comfort—oh ! the deepest and most delicious of modern lounges to "do nothing" in. And roses—roses everywhere—peeped in ; framing the long glass windows set wide open, and giving vistas of fresh flowers glowing all round the smooth greensward, where the fountains always plashed in their pebbled nooks and creepers trailed over from their flower-full vases. Then away below the terraced slope, the lake gleamed in the sunlit glen—surrounded by the deep green woods which refreshed the eyes, insensibly wearied by the intense brilliance of the flower-beds burning with geraniums and anemones.

"But how *did he propose?* tell us that !" cried Rose directly, transfixing me with her bright brown eyes. Rose was declared by our mother—(as youngest she was the favourite)—to have the most common sense of us all.

"Yes ; that's it," chirped Bob, putting his long yellow head quizzically on one side.

"Oh, well, I may tell you that, for Alice told several

of her friends while I was by one day, so I heard it," I replied, feeling sure of my ground, and faithfully repeating our eldest sister's words. "She said she never thought the old thing—I mean" (correcting myself) "she said the dear old thing—cared about her till one afternoon he began mumbling so to her she could not think what he was saying. But at last he asked clearly, might he speak to mother, so Alice guessed of course, and said he had much better, thinking it would save trouble. Then he went to mother, who was sitting in her boudoir—and they arranged it all between them."

"And was that *all*?" uttered Bob, disgusted, whilst Rose scrutinised me still with calmly expectant eyes.

"Oh, well, nearly all—at least Alice said: 'then he just touched her fringe with his beard, and she felt in such a panic lest he had made it look frightful for the afternoon under her bonnet;' that was all," I ended, assuming an air of cynical lightness.

My younger brother and sister eyed me with evident disapprobation.

"And that's what you women have all been making such a fuss about. I call it very poor sport," pronounced Bob in disgust.

"Yes, and I didn't expect it of you, Pleasance, either, to speak in such a heartless way about it. Why, I don't believe Alice can care for him one bit!" added Rose, denouncing my worldliness. Whilst I—conscious of having cried bitterly in secret at the idea of our pretty Alice tying herself voluntarily to a middle-aged dullard—dropped my wedding-mask of complacency and looked at them both rather miserable-eyed.

"What's *the use* of tormenting oneself when Alice is so delighted about it, and mother, and Beau, and all the rest of the world?" I abruptly asked.

"Oh, none at all," promptly agreed Bob. "Only you look as if you *had* been doing so all the same ! which as yourself remarked is foolish. So long as Alice likes it, what's the odds ? "

Here he began airily trying to balance my mother's best *Sèvres bonbonnière* on his nose, to its extreme peril and my terror.

"Well, no ; *you* can't help it, Pleasance," chimed in Rose, who like Bob had begun to see the matter from another side, and to think any extreme personal sensibility on my part misplaced. She was happy in having a mind that always trotted cheerfully along the level in opinions, and even dipped and rose as little in joys and sorrows as could reasonably be consistent with a loving little heart and good temper. But I felt as if the rest of my family were always weighing me, even in small matters, and finding me light in the balance. *Mene, mene, tekel, upharsin !* — My own fault. Why must I be ever dangerously climbing along the heights of enthusiasm, or painfully floundering in the depths of woe ?

"You might tell us what our brother-in-law is like, however," pursued Bob ; nearly upsetting two fragile chairs and a little table by stretching his legs out to their extremest length before him, and his arms behind his head likewise to an alarming extent as he yawned.

"Yes, do begin ; what is his hair like ? " demanded Rose.

"It is not so much black-silvered as grizzled," I replied, transposing Hamlet. "But it's thick enough still except for one bald patch just on the crown, and he has a beard rather less grizzled, that always seems trying to turn up and look at his face."

"That's pretty, Rose ! Well, what sort of sized man is he, Pleasance ? "

"Oh, he is big enough, and stout, too ; not amiss in that way." (I secretly admired men of goodly stature.)

"His head may be a trifle large ; but not much."

"That's better, Bob ; and what eyes, Pleasance ?"

"His eyes are not good, poor man. They are small and light-coloured, and his eyelashes are very pale."

"Dreadful ! He must look just like a pig," ejaculated Rose, hitting off a resemblance in poor Sir Dudley's eyes which had secretly struck me before.

"He did not make himself, or choose his eyes either," was my retort, nevertheless ; feeling the censure too unfair.

"Well, but look here, Pleasance," cried Bob, raising his voice as requesting a final decision. "Since we are acknowledged to be a family of two sorts, Browns and Beaumanoirs, which division will our respected brother-in-law belong to—the stupids or the shining lights, eh ?"

"Well, I think he is certainly more of a goose than a swan," I answered, laughing. "Perhaps as he is a great gourmand and complains of a liver, we might call him a Strasburg goose !"

"Pleasance ! I am shocked and surprised !" said my mother's voice. Entering with her light footfall, she had heard the latter part of our conversation, and added in a tone low, but so cold it withered me : "It is wrong, even unchristian, to prejudice your young brother and sister in this way. What better do *you* expect, I wonder, than such a splendid match as your elder sister is making ? Sir Dudley Digges's personal merits quite satisfy the rest of your family ; but your ideas are so ridiculous that perhaps you will want to turn nurse or missionary, or to marry a penniless curate. At least, I beg you will not try to make Rose as foolish as yourself ; for some day I look to her making quite as good a marriage as Alice."

Contrary to her usual self-possession our mother left the room after saying this, her step somewhat agitated, and her still graceful figure heaving with an anger she would not otherwise betray.

Unlucky me ! . . . Why, oh ! why had she not come five minutes sooner to have heard the perfect propriety of my sentiments, till the honest expressions of my favourite brother and sister had stirred my heart ?

"Poor Pleasance ! You have put your foot in it this time," uttered Bob in a pitying voice.

"I *am* so sorry ! But perhaps we had better take ourselves out of sight for a little till it has blown over," added Rose, young as she was, being practical. I finished my tea in guilty silence, and we stole out on the lawn, just out of direct view of the windows, but ready if summoned to the august Digges' presence.

Meanwhile, we had heard my father's quick, cheery step in the inner hall ; then my mother evidently arrested the onward progress we were all three hailing with joy.

It flashed upon me, with that quick insight we gain into the motives of those with whom we live, that her reason in going out to meet him so quickly, was to avoid my father's entering during any possible further discussion of Sir Dudley.

Somehow I felt sure he was in sympathy with me ; that his evident sorrow at losing his pretty Alice was deeper than it need have been, whilst there seemed a forced acquiescence when mother so often with gentlest artifices strove to place his future son-in-law before him in the most flattering light. Yes ; many little things—half-sighs I had caught, if no one else, a look stolen at Alice now and again of troubled, fond inquiry, an almost imperceptible clouding of that dear, sunny face when the subject of the marriage was uppermost—all

came with new conviction to my mind. I was sorry for him, dear old dad ; but wonderfully consoled by the thought that we two felt alike.

"What are you three out here for, looking as glum as owls ?" asked Alice, tripping out of the glass-door, and looking so pretty and light-hearted as she joined us. Her golden-brown hair was waved all over her small head, and fringed on her forehead. She had the roundest of laughing faces, with no noticeable features but good eyes and a most kissable little mouth with perfect teeth—the general effect being that of a charming child's face. "She looks so innocent," said many people. Truly, as Shakespeare sang :

If ~~she~~ be made of red and white,
Her faults shall ne'er be known.

But before any of us could or would answer Alice, a little Gothic door near us, leading from the shrubbery, opened with a sharp click, and Miss Bee Beaumanoir appeared beside us, emerging with the briskness of a female Jack-in-the-box. Although she was expected this evening, still she always contrived to make her mode of arrival *un*-expected, to her own vast delight

"Well, chickabiddies ! here I am," she exclaimed, as we crowded round her. She seemed positively to have the very same gown and bonnet on her spare little person as when first we had beheld her.

"So here's the pretty bride. Well, Miss Brown, my dear, I hope you're not too fine to speak to me." (For years she had taken peculiar pleasure in addressing Alice with this sentence.) "Is your bridegroom paying a good price for you, eh ? But I won't keep you now ; for I've an idea that he was driving along the approach as I took the short cut through the shrubbery. So be off to meet

him. No, no—we won't come in until the tender greetings are over!"

Alice shrugged her pretty shoulders and went indoors, still turning her head to smile and nod back at us, with a most easy *dis-engaged* air. Her figure looked charming in her pale-pink summer gown that fitted exquisitely, and was coquettishly trimmed with lace on flounces and furbelows.

"Upon my word, Alice looks as if she had been turned into a jelly, and run into that gown," went on Miss Beaumanior, as I may sometimes call her, since she did not greatly like being often addressed as "aunt." Then turning to me: "Now, child, let me see *you*! Come; you're filled out, and grown taller than ever; but you're too pale, and you've still got that old trick of looking one through and through with those great eyes of yours. Pray, why are you not in a pink gown too, instead of this sad-coloured gray calico?"

"You see, Alice always dislikes so much our dressing alike, as if we had no different ideas between us," I murmured. "So as she always wears pinks and blues, and that she chooses my dresses for me——"

"You get only grays and greens," cried my grand-aunt, with an expressive grimace.

"Pleasance, my dear, with your want of spirit, what a nice sort of first season you must have had! Did Alice allow you *any* admirers, or did she throw you a few of her cast-off ones? But you were always the same from a child; why can't you assert your own rights instead of being made to sit with your back to the horses through life?"

"Some one *must* give up in a large family, if things are to go smoothly," I answered, flashing out with an evidence of possessing some of that spirit my grand-aunt

disbelieved in. But she did not heed—being engrossed suddenly like Bob and Rose in listening to the sound of voices in the drawing-room. We all crept nearer, just sheltered by the projection of the bay window. It was a shabby trick ; but our grand-aunt was foremost.

“Yes! I drove along very comfortably from the station in Mr. Brown’s dog-cart. Thought you would have come to meet me, Alice. . . . Oh, all right—doesn’t matter!” Sir Dudley was heard saying in a thick voice, without the smallest variation of tone. “Had a queer sort of companion, though. An old woman who was trailing her gown along in the dust, just like the foolishness of those kind of people (not that it was worth picking out of the gutter); she hailed me and asked, if I was coming in this direction, would I kindly give her a lift. So, ’pon my honour, as it’s so hot a day, and she seemed carrying a bundle, or something that must have tired her, you’ll all think me very soft, but I said ‘Up you get!’ and she hopped up. However, your groom seemed to know about her, for he whispered to me it was all right.” Miss Bee crept nearer the window.

“But what became of her?” asked my mother rather anxiously.

“Well, I brought her up your drive here till we came to what I saw was the back way to the stables and so forth, so then I said: ‘My good woman! you had better get down here; that’s evidently your road.’ So down she got, and I suppose at this moment she is being entertained by your cook. Queer old girl—wonder who she was?”

“Would you know her again if you saw her?” asked our venerable aunt, suddenly stepping in through the open low window.

Tableau inside! Sir Dudley’s feelings and those of my mother may be imagined.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE days that now preceded the wedding seemed still all racket and bustle no less than in London, if differently so; and I felt even more alone. Each post and train brought wedding-presents and new dresses, to see which unpacked gave the greatest delight to every female mind in the house, next to receiving these themselves; yet generally, when I cried out with admiration at sight of some fresh lovely object, Alice would carelessly answer after this fashion:

"Why, I thought I had shown it to everybody the other day. Don't bother, Pleasance dear. Oh, the Mackenzies sent it, or the Mackintoshes, I believe—shabby enough of them! Now I must settle about the bridesmaids' dresses, and you are only in the way. You might just go out to the garden and amuse poor old Dudley."

Sir Dudley, smoking rather sulkily along the terraces, would however have none of my timidly-offered ministrations. Plainly if Alice would not herself come for one of the *tête-à-tête* interviews he stolidly tried to get and she as laughingly avoided, he declined all others of the inferior sex; but consoled himself with the *Times*, or was conducted for the fiftieth time round the farmyard by father with anxious efforts for his entertainment.

One especial day, thus relieved from my disagreeable task, I roamed in the gardens to enjoy a few moments of sweet, perfect stillness away from the house turmoil. Though every tree, bush, and flower of dear Stoke welcomed me back, yet there was still a sense of disappointment in my heart, and I wished myself a child again. Little though Alice had allowed me to be her

companion, the vague hope of becoming more to her had always led me on—though she would have laughed at my sisterly longing as sentimental.

Really, I was lonely those days; and no one clung more to companionship. My mother?—well, she liked first to enjoy a large and exclusive share of my father's society; next, that of her favourite children; lastly, she had the constant care of our position in society. Beau was a *Sèvres* china sort of elder brother, much admired from a distance, but seldom brought into contact with us country bumpkins. Bob, my best-beloved, seldom seemed to care, when at home, to give up an hour's amusement for me. Rose was still fast bound by that iron rule, perhaps wholesome, of many English mothers like our own, whose schoolroom girls are not permitted to be seen except at lunch-time; their society being restricted to that of their governess, and their wildest indulgences to currant-cake at six-o'clock tea and a good cry over "The Heir of Redclyffe."

I scarcely ever saw her.

My father alone—! But as I was thinking, he came down the gravelled path towards me. He had evidently escaped from Sir Dudley, and was weary, for the old quick tread was slow and heavy.

"Well, my pet! why are you by yourself?" he asked, putting his arm round my shoulders, and relaxing from his occupied air into a slow saunter of satisfaction. "I don't like to see you so much alone, do you know, Pleasance? It's not good for young people."

"Who is there for me to be with?" I asked, glad and contented at once by his presence, adding with a mock pout, a piece of silly gaiety I never indulged in to others: "*You* never have time to spare for me now; and you know very well no one else especially wants me."

"Ah, well," said my father with a quick half-sigh that surprised me, as he tightened his embrace, "I can't give you as much companionship as I would like, dear; but as I may have to lose you too, like Alice, I can hardly tell you, my child, how earnestly I trust your husband may be a good man whom you can entirely love and respect."

I thought of Sir Dudley almost with a shudder; and drew closer to his shoulder, exclaiming, "Oh, father, I never want to leave you!"

He smiled, well pleased, but rather sadly (I remember wondering why at the time).

"My pet, we must part in the course of nature long before your life's race will be run. May the All-wise Father of us all send you a wiser, better companion on the road than your old father."

"Please, sir," said a footman appearing at this moment, "Mrs. Brown wants you particularly to come in."

We two approached the windows—our first dear discourse since many a day thus stopped short. My mother rustled out, in her invariably handsome dress, to meet us; looking like an anxious general whose second in command had left her alone to bear the day's heat and burden.

"My dear, do you know that Sir Dudley is alone in the drawing-room?" she said, in gentle reproach. Then turning to me with a more injured tone: "And really, Pleasance, instead of idling, you might be helping your poor sister, I think. There are two dozen notes of thanks for presents to be written, and you can easily imitate Alice's hand. She has left the list for you in the library."

In very truth, since early morning till late at night,

I had been slaving and toiling for Alice, without a word of thanks or even recognition; yet it was only now I felt really vexed. I knew Alice *had* time in plenty to write her own letters, since she simply flitted like a butterfly from her dresses to her presents: and then—well, she might have deigned to consult me a little about my own bridesmaid's dress! On second thoughts, however, my sister was more anxious to suit the rather different figures and complexions of the two Miss Pawletts, nieces of the bridegroom. Lady Pawlett, Sir Dudley's sister, was a person of influence in London society, and "*so much depended on pleasing her!*" our mother had anxiously said, thinking of her daughter's first flight alone from the paternal nest. Out upon my selfishness, then!—yet I wished our wedding over, whilst turning meekly indoors.

"But, Ada, this is becoming a tax," said my father decidedly. "Alice must come and entertain Sir Dudley herself, instead of putting it on all of us."

"She is so busy, poor child," said my mother excusingly. "She has been setting out all her presents in my boudoir for show; and he will go in and disturb her so, she says, that really she can do nothing right."

"No matter; it is her duty to try and please him, so the sooner she begins the better."

"It will be all right, you will see, *after marriage*," declared my mother, with such a tone of thorough conviction in her voice, that I, hearing no more, might well suppose the discussion ended.

This was one of her favourite maxims. Perhaps, secretly, she believed in its infallibility from her own experience; since certainly her own was a case in point. Herself supposed to have made a match rather of prudence and esteem than of affection—although my

father's ardent attachment to the poor county beauty was a matter of history—there was no doubt that “after marriage” he had entirely won her heart by devoting to her a life-time of constant, forbearing devotion ; whilst she recognised that such a wise, superior mind as his does not always accompany so large and patient a heart. We all knew that whilst loving her own way and to affect rule, yet she leaned in the main more on my father's strong Brown sense than she would have owned—even at the very time she might be trying to sway him to a Beaumanoir whim, and that seldom in vain, by the affection he bore her.

“Slaving away, Cinderella !” remarked my grand-aunt's cynical old voice. “Bless me, how hot I am ! I've been out with Bob breaking in the bay filly till I nearly got a sunstroke. It's a pity I've not a fortune, or I'd leave it all to that boy. We've been enjoying ourselves finely, while you've been moped in this dark library till you look as grave and lonely as a nun. I'll tell you what it is, Pleasance, you want *billets doux* and *chiffons* to brighten you up, as the French say, who know women well. With a pink dress like Alice's, and a lover, you'd see what a different girl you would be.”

“I must be different, indeed, if I could stand a lover like Alice's,” I cried, gathering up all my notes that Miss Bee's old shawl had swept far and wide over the polished floor.

My grand-aunt was most kind to me, yet her sympathy was not always pleasing. She pickled her good nature in vinegar too often, and was as exaggerated in her words as in her dress and manners. She would have given us to her last crust and penny with all her kindly queer heart, but had not to give me other gifts most prized from those we love—wise womanly counsel,

delicate understanding, all the guidance, forbearance, and help that are the fruits of experience and affection in our elders. Besides, one could better romp with dear old Bee than venerate so *un-venerable* a grand-aunt.

One afternoon, two days later, I was sitting alone in the little flower-garden, called My Lady's garden, after a long dead Lady Betty, who had married a Bracy when George I. was king ; and had left for all memories of a short sweet youth, this pretty pleasaunce planned in the bride-year that was her last ; and a full-length portrait inserted in the wainscoting of our inner hall.

So, I was alone, and for once idle. The others had all gone off, a large party, in the coach to meet Lady Pawlett and her daughters at the station ; Beau driving, but Bob consoling himself loudly with the horn.

"There is hardly room for you, Pleasance," Alice had said graciously, as prime minister ; "still, come if you like."

"Pleasance, there is no room for you ; so you will stay and see that tea is ready for us," my mother gently commanded, adding in a lower tone : "I want Sir Dudley and Alice to have the back seat to themselves, and it does not really matter much about *your* making friends with the Pawlett girls."

So they started, and in the sunny, sleepy afternoon I was sitting in the remotest corner of this my favourite nook, lulled by the hour, the unusual quiet, the heavy flower-scents, and the "hot noise of bees." There were several summer-houses hidden in various green recesses of My Lady's garden—a shell-house, a thatched bower inlaid with wood, and this last, my favourite, lined with blue Dutch tiles showing the true story of Reynard the Fox. It had low oaken seats in which one could really rest, and look out through lattices of coloured glass—

wide-opened this day—at the lake and glen on one side; or up green alleys lined with flowers, to where above the topmost terraces some gable or chimney of Stoke could just be seen.

I was looking out of one of the windows, framed in sweet jessamine, my head leant idly on my hand, and a book dropped sideways down, while I hummed from memory :

“Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
Old time is still a-flying ;
And this same flower that smiles to-day,
To-morrow will be dying.”

Before the last murmured word had left my parted lips, there was a rustle below among the leaves. What—who was this . . . ? A young man was gazing up at me, and I having never seen him before gazed back astonished. How long he had been there I did not know ; but in those few silent seconds that followed, his face, as he stood still in the vivid sunlight, was stamped as clearly on my memory as his figure stood out distinct against the yew-hedge behind.

If I shut my eyes now, I could—if I still would—see him just so again.

Not of tall stature, but, in the old-fashioned phrase, goodly in face ; well-built and active. He had crisply-waved chestnut hair and somewhat redder moustache, a clear-cut nose that seemed almost as expressive of its owner's moods as his other features, and the most sleepy, laughing, good-humoured blue eyes in the world upturned towards me. How many more moments still the situation might have lasted I cannot tell, but that (being far too shy to speak first) my pale cheeks felt a sudden crimson tide.

He took off his hat.

"Miss Pleasance Brown, I think? The butler told me you were in the garden. It seems I was not expected till a later train. May I introduce myself? My name is Clair St. Leger."

"Oh yes; excuse my not knowing sooner. You are to be Sir Dudley's best man," I murmured, coming forward to the arbour-door with all the gracious dignity I could muster, to greet such a distinguished wedding-guest. He sprang lightly up the steps to meet my proffered hand. "We have heard of you from my eldest brother, too," I went on; "I believe you are a great friend of his. Beau has driven the coach over to meet you. He will be so sorry."

"Well, I cannot be very sorry, as it gives me the pleasure of seeing this charming spot; and of making your acquaintance a little sooner," he replied.

His voice had that indescribable charm, which the French rightly therefore term the *je ne sais quoi*, of a man who has so lived in the world and its best society that *it* has made *him* what he is; while he and his like make it. In manner, too, he had a peculiarly soft, winning way, a graceful ease (I know a few unkind acquaintance called this impudence—but there seldom was a more universal favourite). Now, seeing I was an *ingénue*, he took the lead, yet with an air of most courteous deference that flattered my young pride. He asked me to show him the garden, with which he declared himself already fascinated—"This fairy-like domain, where you were looking out of your bower-lattice like an enchanted princess," he laughingly called it. So I did the honours of the yew-hedges and pleached alleys; the showers of white jessamine or sweet honeysuckle that brushed our faces as we passed under arches almost closed with blossoms; the pebbled

paths and paved runnels down which little streamlets always trickled, fed fresh from the hill above. He gathered me a softly-pale pink rose that was out of my reach; and I gravely gave him a sweet white bud.

"It is lovely; but is it appropriate?" he asked, luring me to a bench shaded from the hot afternoon sun. Then, as I looked at him full in questioning surprise, he added—just veiling his eyes with lashes as long as any woman's, while a peculiar little dainty twitch of his clearly-cut nose seemed to imply, that though the words coming were not worth his smile, yet they meant in his own mind a little more than common (very likely he fancied the trick unnoticed)—"Would not a red bud have described me better? I am afraid it would," he went on. "I have a sort of theory about roses, Miss Pleasance . . . Brown." (How long invented, I now wonder?) "See! white roses are for innocence and childhood; but this lovely pink one of yours, only just tinged a little warmer in the heart, ought to describe yourself; while the deep red means the older, perhaps sinful, beings who have lived so much longer in the world—like me."

"But can innocence not go beyond the days of childhood?" I asked, half-startled to find myself classed in the pink stage.

"Why, yes—it may, of course; only I meant, perhaps, more the *ignorance* of the good and evil of this world," he laughed, looking at me out of those blue eyes that had such a caressing expression. "To have 'lived and loved,' is not that to know? And it would surprise me very much if you had passed through a season without having seen some such effect in others, around you. Although I could almost dare to swear" (looking at me keenly) "that it is only from such a *reflected* glow that your rose might take a shade of pink."

My face was pink enough now.

"I forgot—I wanted to make a bouquet for my father's study-table," I murmured for an answer, scarcely alarmed at his idle words and slow, soft look, yet with a strange feeling.

"Let me help you. I am very fond of making bouquets," cried Mr. St. Leger, rising at once to gather my flowers. Then when my lap was full, and that he had wooed me to equanimity again with moss rose-buds, and won me altogether back to happy converse by the daintiest sprays of clematis and hop tendrils gathered above my reach, we sat down again together; while he chose out which flowers I should use as pleased his sovereign liking. We were like a pair of innocent children. He scolded my imputed want of skill. I retorted upon his conceit.

It was all such simple, innocent amusement, that I need hardly have felt so startled when there came calls through the garden, and Alice and Beau, of all people ! appeared searching for us.

"Pleasance ! how could you be so forgetful as not to have given poor Mr. St. Leger some tea ?" cried Alice chidingly, after a bright welcome to the guest. "We have all been back some time, and were wondering what *had* become of you."

"I did ask him, but he preferred staying here," I murmured, falling back with a sort of shock into my subdued position of the one who did everything wrong.

"Yes. I declared for tea-roses instead of tea, and lilies instead of late luncheon," interposed Clair St. Leger, taking in the situation at a glance, and taking up my defence against the disapproving looks of both Beau and my sister ; adding with a laugh: "To own the truth,

I had had a glass of sherry and a biscuit from the butler when I arrived."

"That is all right, old chap," uttered Beau with a satisfied air, in his rather affected drawl, as he glanced at me, reassured on the score of my good behaviour; adding graciously :

"Pleasance has been taught by having brothers, what are the real wants and likings of misrepresented man."

Who?—I! Secretly I hung my head, for it had never once occurred to me that my pleasant companion's sportiveness among the flowers and over our bouquet arose from the secret consciousness of having had sherry and biscuits; but I kept my own counsel. As Alice and I went towards the house, Beau and his friend following us in affectionate discourse, my sister said, glancing at me curiously: "Really it quite *looked* as if you and Mr. St. Leger were flirting together when I first saw you. Take care, Pleasance; that is going ahead rather fast."

"Flirting? Did you ever know me flirt before?"—in an injured tone.

"No, never. I don't believe it is in you," laughed Alice good-naturedly, but with a certain something of secret superiority as she said so. "Only *he* is supposed to know as much about it as most people. Come!—Mamma was inclined to be angry because you were not in to receive us, but I'll make it all straight."

I followed her into the drawing-room, feeling rather injured and abashed, for really it sometimes struck me that my mother would understand me better if Alice did not always interpose as if a necessary ambassador between us. There, Lady Pawlett, a tall, handsome woman with dark eyes, looked me all over, but did not take

the trouble to say anything ; though turning to my mother next moment she began talking with effusive warmth, and most agreeably as she sipped her tea. The two Misses Pawlett, middle-sized, plain girls, looked at me too in a stolid way ; made a sort of soundless effort each to speak, but produced no word, apparently because they had nothing to say.

Evidently, having come to stay with us, they considered it only fit they should be entertained, but had no idea of entertaining me ; although I had rushed desperately into conversation in the hopes of atoning for my pleasant indiscretion in the garden.

Alice had gaily retreated under cover of allowing some mild love-making to Sir Dudley in the next room. By her quizzical look towards me, she knew already what a hopeless task she had left me. It was an inexpressible relief when my mother rose and proposed showing her guests to their rooms to rest before dinner ; which offer Lady Pawlett accepted with cheerful alacrity, observing :

“ It does take me so much longer to dress properly after a journey. But my girls will take a nap instead, I know—lazy children ! You see I am the active one of the family, dear Mrs. Brown.”

Miss Pawlett, at this, gave a sort of mysterious smile, observing in a strangely impressive undertone : “ It’s often the best way of passing one’s time.”

Miss Amy Pawlett, the other “ child ” of three or four-and-twenty, followed in obedient silence ; giving one backward look of some slow regret, however, at Beau and his friend St. Leger, who just then crossed the inner hall on their way to the former’s private den.

CHAPTER IX.

UPSTAIRS in my own room, for a delicious hour and a half before dinner, I was free to think again over what had passed.

Why—what was it? I had only been in the garden, and seen a stranger. And now he was not a stranger any more; while I felt so much richer by having found such a pleasant acquaintance who had been living some six-and-twenty years in the world, without my having ever known it!

There were three small windows in my low, wide room under the western cottage-roof—one to dress at; one to write at; one to look out of, with the fairest view of all, down below on the lake where the swans were like silver specks. Here I sat down, and gazed, seeing very little of the real beautiful world; dreaming idly, in the window-seat, with a most singular lack of invention. For indeed all that I saw and thought was only of what had passed in the garden; trying—already—to fit in my memory all the pleasant looks and quaint turns of speech, and the few complimentary words said with such a flattering intonation by Mr. Clair St. Leger. It was delightfully difficult; for their essence, like a dreamily subtle atmosphere, was round me still, while half of what we had both said seemed ready to vanish away—silly speeches enough, but I liked to rescue them again from oblivion.

How well he had looked, when first I saw him standing down there in the sun!—so on I thought, and thought again.

It had been like Beaumont and Fletcher's lines :

Sitting in my window,
Printing my thoughts in lawn, I saw a god,
I thought (but it was you), enter our gates ;
My blood flew out, and back again as fast
As I had puffed it forth, and sucked it in
Like breath ; then was I called away in haste
To entertain you.

Having made my calculations with secret joy that Mr. St. Leger must certainly take me in to dinner—since Beau and Bob would naturally have the Miss Pawletts for their share—I dressed myself with more than usual care. The pink rose seemed to nestle of its own accord low down among the dark-brown coils of my hair (we still wore flowers in our hair in those days). For the first time I became aware that my shoulders were really whiter than the soft folds of my shimmering white dress edged with delicate lace that half veiled them ; while my throat did not compare unfavourably with the double string of pearls that clasped it. In London I had felt so raw and countrified, plunged straight from the schoolroom into society, outshone by Alice, and painfully aware that my mother believed I would not be a success, and at all events must not be brought forward till Alice was well married ; but now, once more at home, I felt to-night quite the assured airs of a fine London belle. As I shook out my long skirts before the glass in the westerling light, my figure seemed taller and more lissom than ever before, though it would have always pleased Lord Byron's taste when he wrote, "I hate your dumpy women." How silly of me ! but I turned my long neck a little this way and that, to study the best poise and carriage of my head ; and was glad that if my face was pale it was not

pasty like that of poor Miss Pawlett, whilst my eyes seemed large and dark-brown enough to give shade and their sober colour to light up my other features. I must have been partly right, for as I came down the old oak stairs into the inner hall, which we used as a sort of lounging-room, Bob—who was making solitary lunges there over our ladies' tiny billiard-table—put down his cue with an applauding rattle and cried under his breath: "Whew! You do look stunning, old girl! What has happened, that you are so—so transmogrified?"

"Bob," I only replied with sweet severity, "it is time for you to put on your best manners, and come into the drawing-room with me."

The March hare grinned; and putting down his cue performed a cartwheel, on his hands and feet, like a street-boy, the full length of the hall, the last turn of which triumphantly replanted him in an upright position again at the foot of the stairs, just as Lady Pawlett was sailing downwards. Her poor daughters humbly followed; their stout shapes looking oddly in rather short muslin frocks, blue sashes, and black shoes, like little schoolroom girls.

"Dear me! quite a feat of—eccentricity," remarked her Ladyship blandly; gazing at him with a much more benignant glance than she had ever deigned towards *me*, whilst Bob stood looking redder than even the glow of his exercise warranted.

"What it is to be a man—or, rather, even a boy!" thought I.

In the drawing-room an indescribable air of high spirits seemed brought among us by St. Leger. He stood smiling in the centre of a group that had drawn insensibly round him, as if, feeling himself Phœbus, he was glad to beam; and somehow all we women felt elated by his presence.

"Look at that fellow," muttered Beau, half-admiringly, half-peevisly in my ear. "How does he get his tailor to fit him so, I wonder!"

I could not answer, for my heart suddenly sank. The door had opened to admit our curate, an excellent little man of no individuality; and I found him offering *me* his arm to dinner whilst the owner of the exquisitely fitting coat passed me, smiling, with dear old Aunt Bee, whose claims I had quite forgotten.

It was a dinner of cross purposes—rather like the game of Crooked Attorney, when every one answers for some one else, or pays forfeit. My ears, shame to tell, were pricked to catch every low, soft inflection of Mr. St. Leger's utterance as he talked pleasantly enough to my grand-aunt; so that I heard nothing of many interesting details concerning the working of our new soup-kitchen, the last of the many charities with which my father had flooded the parish. At the lower end of the table, Lady Pawlett, with much play of her still fine dark eyes and liberal *display* of white shoulders, was trying to fascinate my dear simple father. He, quite unconscious of all this, was only uneasy that mother seemed somewhat neglecting poor dull Lord Pawlett, whilst enlivening her other guests with her own especial gift of bright, clever, yet always gentle attack and repartee; talking as ladies in the old, well-bred *salons* used. He did not understand that in society people followed Lady Pawlett's lead in neglecting her spouse, whose principal duty seemed to be putting down her empty tea-cup, or carrying her shawl; so now father sent the butler with occasional quiet little messages of—"Would not Lord Pawlett try this hock, or the sherry of some dead, famous connoisseur?—considered rather fine, he believed." On

which, pleased gleams lit up his silent Lordship's inexpressive face.

"Good gracious, my dear Mr. Brown, you are quite spoiling my husband," interposed my Lady with gracious peevishness several times. "But you millionaires hardly know what to do with your money, I suppose. *We* never could afford such wine." Opposite me, Bee, with her gray hair skewered atop of her head by a tortoise-shell arrow, in honour of our guests, her old black barège dress looking scarcely the worse for wear since these many years (for even then it *could* hardly have been shabbier), was riding full tilt one of her favourite hobbies. She was entertaining St. Leger vastly, and, indeed, most of those around, with a lively history of how the Bey or Dey of Tunis or Morocco (I forget which) had fallen desperately in love with her, on one of her travels; offering to put away all his other wives for her sake; till finding this meant bowstringing, she had beat a hasty retreat to spare her conscience.

On this our good curate, who had a mind as simple and gentle as a baby, but was one of those persons who cannot laugh and let a joke go by—always wanting instead first to *understand* it, then to ask questions about it, lastly liking to harp back upon it for a year to come, when the rest of the world is sick thereof—he now gravely observed in preliminary:

"Well now, Miss Beaumanoir, I can hardly understand that; I always understood that those Mussulman fanatics admired *fat* women."

He stopped short, disconcerted at the roar of laughter which came from us all; for our grand-aunt was as "lene as a rake," and shrivelled to a shred of humanity.

"Never mind," she cried patronisingly, joining

heartily in the laugh. "I see you are a man of taste, and like slim figures—like me. Oh, I see you and I would get on famously together. Come! I'm off to the Nile next month, and you may come with me—there's an offer. It will open your mind tremendously, and all you stay-at-home people want that. You'll see, the ancient Egyptians were much more civilised than your dear Israelites. I'll take you under my wing, and be a mother to you."

Almost blushing at the last part of the kind proposal, my neighbour, with all eyes upon him, murmured he feared his parish would not like it if he took such a long holiday—even if he wished it.

"Bless you! they'd never miss you," cried our grand-aunt heartily. "Why, the last time I was in the Holy Land we had seven clergymen, all of our party, with Cook. Three Baptists, a Moravian, a Wesleyan, and two Irvingites. I was the best friends in the world with every man of them. Only the poor Wesleyan had his tent next mine, and he *did* wrestle so in prayer, he kept me awake half the night! He was a fine fellow."

Our curate, though liberal-minded, seemed dubious at this partisanship. Lady Pawlett, who was "high," tossed her head as if scandalised. Beau artfully interposed.

"Have me for one of your party, too, Bee" (our grand-aunt loved being called Bee by her nephews); "St. Leger and I, eh? We would be very good boys, I promise you; and you know you love young men."

"Pray do, Miss Beaumanoir—I can hardly imagine a more agreeable companion," responded Clair St. Leger. At that moment his eye caught mine—as it had already done once or twice that evening—with more meaning in the sunny glance, I fancied, than there was for others;

while an almost imperceptible accent on the word "hardly" quickened my foolish pulses with a flattered feeling.

"Take you two elegant extracts! Not I indeed," cried Bee, in her highest good-humour. "Why, the last time, Beau, you came to stay at The Barn for the Duchess of Westerton's ball, you brought a dressing-case so big and so broad it required my three maids and the gardener to carry it upstairs. If you were only going to Paris, I've no doubt you would think it necessary to travel with your bed, bath, cheval-glass, a wardrobe, and a *coffin*."

As the laughter over this died away, we heard Sir Dudley speaking, almost for the first time. Quoth he solemnly, in answer to some interesting question of his hostess :

"*Very* tender mutton indeed, Mrs. Brown; yes, I assure you. And the plates are so thoroughly hot, too. 'Pon my soul! I like plain dinners like yours, thoroughly well cooked, far better than the wretched attempts of most people at fine dishes."

My mother sat serenely beaming after this compliment, as if her mind was at rest. But old Aunt Bee, gazing expressively at the nearest *menu*-card of what was by no means a meagre feast, muttered audibly to St. Leger, who wickedly egged her on in her out-spokenness :

"Plain dinner, indeed! I wish I had him at The Barn—bacon and eggs, and porter!"

As to the rest of us, Alice paid no attention whatever to Sir Dudley, but laughed with and listened to every one else. Of the two dull Pawlett girls, the younger, who was with Bob, looked at Beau; and the elder, who was with Beau, looked at the opposite wall. I have already owned whose eyes met mine, and who had my secret attention.

Later on, in the drawing-room, Lady Pawlett sank into the most comfortable chair she could find, near the door by which the gentlemen would enter; ordered one daughter to find her a footstool; and gave the other languidly her tea-cup to hold. There, as she conversed with my mother and Alice with volubility, both "the children," as she called them, sat by watching for her behests. They were so like maids in waiting, that, much as I pitied them, I hardly liked to distract their furtive attention. In a way, it did me good to see them; for being sometimes inclined to think my mother's very absolute love of her own way a heavy if gentle yoke, here was the contrast of a how much heavier one—lightened by none of the sweet grace and pretty blandishments that we could not fail to admire, even when most kept in hand by our home-ruler.

Aunt Bee, after a while, suddenly called me to look out at the moonlight just rising over the lake.

"We will stay here, my dear," she whispered, placing herself on the window-seat. "I've no notion of your doing Alice's work for her. Besides, here come the gentlemen, and—I thought so—Clair St. Leger's eyes are turning where they did during dinner. Don't blush, child!—though, indeed, that little is very becoming."

Next moment St. Leger was bending over me; and with a brusque movement my grand-aunt had left my side, observing: "Oh, are you there, scapegrace? I can't stay to talk to you; Lord Pawlett and the curate both want to be brisked up and trotted out, so I must see after them."

"Dear old soul! How nice of her to leave me her place!" murmured Clair, sinking into the deep embrasure of the window. Here we seemed quite apart from all the rest, looking out on an exquisite night-scene

lit by heaven's candles ; though close by sounded the uninteresting chatter of the ordinary world, which by mute consent neither of us seemed to heed in the least degree. "And," he went on, bending a little nearer as if to admire the rose in my hair—"it was still nicer of somebody else to wear my flower. I could hardly keep my eyes off it all evening ; it looks so charming just under that little ear."

"I wish you would not laugh at me, Mr. St. Leger. I am *not* accustomed to have compliments paid me," drawing away from him half-frightened, half-fascinated.

"Don't look at me with such an air of injured dignity, please, Miss Pleasance Brown. If nobody has ever said to you more than that, why !—the world must be dull indeed, and without discrimination. Shall I say you are not nice ; and that you have a very big ear?"

"Please say nothing——"

"Nothing !" interrupting me softly. "Very well, I won't. Only then you must talk to me with those speaking eyes, as you did to-day in the garden. How quiet and subdued you are to-night ! Do look at me."

By way of proving that I was not an utterly timid *ingénue*, I did look up, meaning it to be for one moment—but for several more found my gaze arrested by his laughing, caressing one. Just because there was that look of amusement mingled with his admiration, I did not feel half so discomposed with him as with almost any one else in his place. So we sat perfectly silent for some seconds. St. Leger seemed to have assumed that we had entered into a compact thereunto ; for with one arm on the window-sill lazily supporting his head, with the other he toyed with my fan. Every now and then my eyes dropped ; I would turn away from this confusing private lesson in magnetism. But he

would arrest my attention again, with the look of a mischievous school-boy, by apparently threatening destruction to my beloved fan, which I dared not snatch from him, and which he mutely refused to restore. Suddenly he protested under his breath : "What a nuisance ! They are coming to rout us out of this dear little corner—we have not been happy here five minutes."

We had not. But already my mother was bestirring herself, on behalf of the Miss Pawletts, to get up a round game.

"You young people will all play, and we can look on," she smiled, "unless Lady Pawlett—what, oh, you would like to join too ! Where is Mr. St. Leger ? Ah, Pleasance, are *you* there ? Mr. St. Leger, would you like better to play Van John than to sit still ?"

"I shall be delighted to play anything on earth you like, Mrs. Brown ; including my own natural part of the fool," drawled Clair in evasive reply, with a quick regretful look at me. Still he rose with an air of such outwardly easy willingness to leave my side, that inwardly I felt rather surprised. He was placed between the Pawletts by mother, who, in spite of some remonstrances aside from Beau, was bent on arranging the game. Secretly I agreed with Beau ; thinking that unless every one feels like school-boys and girls, it is the dreariest thing on earth to set grown people down perforce to play for counters or sixpenny stakes at *vingt-et-un* ; and my conscience had—then as now—scruples against playing for *much* money.

Meanwhile, our elders withdrew to comfortable arm-chairs ; father and Lord Pawlett talking of turnips ; mother resting, gracefully weary ; and Aunt Bee actually producing fun in the curate. But our game languished as such amusements generally do. Alice and Sir Dudley

banked, thereby keeping both their conversation and their counters apart. Mild jokes, with which we had all begun, were changed gradually to covert yawns as time passed. Lady Pawlett, who was struggling to be lively with all the determination of over two-score years, kept endeavouring to attract St. Leger's attention from her daughter beside him to herself opposite, which the latter did not seem to altogether relish. In this delicate dilemma, Clair conducted himself with the most perfect impartiality between both claimants; keeping up jokes with an even flow of great good-humour that rather mortified me; for now he never looked my way. Still—my vain mind began to fancy there was no flash or sparkle on the surface of his mirth; and so Beau, his friend, apparently thought too. For, as my mother came to bend over the chair of her eldest-born to ask with well-assumed interest after the fortunes of the game, in her silvery, complacent voice, he hastily muttered:

"It won't do, mother. Look, St. Leger is bored to death; you can't set men like him down to this sort of thing nowadays! *Why can't you let us amuse ourselves in our own way?*"

My mother drew back rather aghast at this rebellion of her best-beloved against her long-established conviction that she knew best what we all really liked. But even at the same moment our grand-aunt, perceiving the state of affairs, and inspired by her whimsical love of movement, sat down to a piano in the oak saloon which opened out of the drawing-room by large doors, and began rattling out a frantic polka. We all flung down our cards; and next moment, as if bitten by a tarantula, were spinning over the polished floor in there, from which Bob had deftly whipped away the Turkey rugs in the twinkling of an eye.

Almost before I knew it, Clair St. Leger's arm was round my waist, and he had whirled me off in a most delightful dance. Both my brothers were doing their duty manfully with the Pawlett girls, who had quite roused into warmth. The affianced pair were revolving together as fast as Alice could make Sir Dudley heavily bestir himself. Lady Pawlett alone had been left out, to her momentary disgust ; but then seizing gaily on my father she insisted on his dancing, and away he went with his coat-tails flying in a fine old-fashioned step, whilst my lady towered over his dear bald pate. How Aunt Bee played first a polka, then changed into a waltz, then a mad galop, like one possessed ! And we danced on and on, not changing our partners, except Bob, who having the eldest Miss Pawlett to his sorry share, was pounced on presently by her Ladyship, who claimed him for herself. As for me, I was breathless with delight—and also because Clair St. Leger would hardly let me stop a moment, lest, as he whispered, we should be separated. Dancing had never before meant more to me than plunging into the Maelstrom of a crowded room, mostly with Alice's rejected and dejected admirers ; but *this* was paradisiacal.

When at last all ceased in delighted exhaustion we two, at least, seemed to have acquired a tenfold acquaintance of each other ; why, we seemed old, old friends as we looked in each other's eyes !

"And now it's my turn," cried my grand-aunt, springing up. "Come, Lord Pawlett, I'll challenge you to a jig."

Alice, with a scream of laughter, flew to the piano.

Lord Pawlett, fired by Bee's example and father's generous wines and attentions, began to shuffle his feet like a solemn beaver trying to be lively ; with depreca-

ting haw-haws against himself ; while his witch-like old partner performed the most wonderful steps opposite him, cutting, crossing her feet in the air, with the most surprising agility, considering her age.

Bob, with his lopsided visage all on the grin, finding no one else to jig with, was jiggling away by himself.

"How eccentric your aunt is ! What a blessing it must be that every one *knows* she is a Beaumanoir," acidly smiled Lady Pawlett, her good-humour being gone. Our saloon had been rather a *salle des pas perdus* to her ; as none of the young men had paid her the special attention she still tried desperately for, save Beau ; and having some maternal conscience, my Lady had plainly meant him for one of her daughters in her own mind. Though, if that was impracticable, she was quite willing to flirt with him herself.

As we were all breaking up, my mother, who was beside me, murmured apart to Beau with a fond forgiving smile :

"Well, my dear, I am so glad you did enjoy yourself after all. Tell me, is not it odd that such a quiet person as Sir Dudley should have chosen Mr. St. Leger for his best man ?"

"Not at all," replied Beau carelessly. "Old Dudley has not really got any friends, you see, except utter old fogies like himself ; so luckily he happened to know St. Leger, who is quite in 'the swim' on the other hand. I suspect Clair doesn't mind doing it, because he is sure to be asked to Broadhams for the shooting, and some good dinners. He is always staying about somewhere or other."

"Ah ! He is not well off, is he ? That is the worst of him."

"He has got about eight or nine hundred a year of

his own, I believe," was Beau's reply, disparagingly given: "Enough for a bachelor."

"Ah, yes."

Then advancing with her charming smile, mother shook hands with St. Leger, in his turn, as engagingly as if he had been heir to half a million, and we ladies trooped up the dark old stairs, making quite a pretty picture with our lights and coloured dresses against the sombre wood-work of walls and ceiling—as Clair called out to us, looking up to me.

"Pleasance, come into my room a moment," said my grand-aunt; as mother went on escorting Lady Pawlett to the glories of the blue and gold bed-room, that was all trimmed with old point-lace. And meanwhile Alice, prettily stifling a yawn, dutifully preceded her future nieces to their virgin chambers hung appropriately in white muslin. Aunt Bee had our second finest bed-room: Indeed, but for her odd habits, mother would no doubt have thought a Beaumanoir deserved the best. But, as the housekeeper observed, it was "heart-rending the way" Miss Beaumanoir flouted the splendidly-carved catafalque, wherein it was doubtfully related Charles II. had slept, declaring she would prefer any little iron cot, "in which the only turn one could take would be the turn out." Now she looked like a witch amongst the crimson silk glories of the room.

"Well?" she just asked; holding my hand with her lean withered one, that was, however, still vice-like in its firmness, while like the ancient mariner she transfixed me with her glittering eye.

"Well!" quoth I, guessing her malicious meaning, but resolved not to betray myself.

"Tiresome girl! So that's all my thanks for acting

fairy godmother to you and your admirer to-night? Ah! you may well blush; but I was right that you only wanted rousing to be almost a beauty . . . a tall divinity, St. Leger called you to me; some men like—positively like—dark-eyed pale faces like yours when the face is small and the eyes big; and your pallor looks pure-bred. Queer tastes! Now *I* always had little eyes and a big head, and never looked half so well-bred as a brown minx like you! Well, well, good-night, Pleasance, child; anyhow, your old aunt tries to do the best she can for you."

Dear old Bee! truly she did so try; and if only others had been as loyal, my story might have been a different one—whether for ultimate good or evil.

But in my own room once more, as I had dreamed in daylight, so I lay awake to dream; and dreamt in sleep again only of every word and sign and look of Clair St. Leger, hugging myself in foolish secret joy at the now double assurance that he admired me.

CHAPTER X.

WE bridesmaids were all kneeling in the little aisle of Stoke church—eight creamy-clad maids all a-row. For though too new still in the country to be very intimate with our exclusive neighbours' daughters, we had nevertheless by virtue of our riches managed to borrow four of their children.

As head bridesmaid I was nearest the bridal pair,

and felt as if I could hardly take my eyes off them. How stout, burly, *stupid* Sir Dudley looked; and Alice—a smiling angel of loveliness in white satin. Some strange feeling suddenly so touched my heart, the tears rising in my eyes, and a hysterical lump, like an egg, in my throat, that I could scarcely keep myself from screaming out: “Don’t take him, Alice; don’t! Say, *No, even at the altar-rails.*” Good heavens! to have to live with Sir Dudley as closest companion one’s life long; to walk, sit, drive with him day after day. (In my innocence I never doubted but that Alice meant to do all this.) It seemed to me a thousandfold worse, too, now that *I knew* how delightful the society of some men could be. But Alice did know; she had seen the world. I had to bend my head till my spasm of horror and sorrowful regret was past. Did I not remember how, after all, only last night when I had gone into her room to say good-night—feeling really keenly that it was for the last time Alice was wholly ours—she had cried out lightly: “How ridiculously sentimental you look, Pleasance! Don’t, for goodness’ sake, devour me so uncomfortably with those great eyes of yours.”

But, in spite of all, I was still horribly afraid that Alice might break down. I knew that under an enforced calm, more than was natural, my mother was watching her nervously also. So with an effort, fearing to see a sudden gush of tears, I raised my eyes—The bride was laughing so much in her cobweb lace handkerchief that the little curate looked scandalised! But a dignified Dean and solemn Rector, supplied by the Digges’ party in the alliance, were so smug and stolid perhaps they mistook her movement for sobbing. At that moment another pair of eyes met my pained ones. Clair St. Leger looked at me with such tender

interest, such a quick glance of pitying affection, that the warm blood swept my cheeks, and my heart beat fast whilst devoutly thankful that the curiously-watching crowd behind could not see my face. When it was all over, and we had filed out after the bride, St. Leger, helping me into a carriage, furtively touched my hand—a mere quick touch, but yet a sympathetic one that again made me feel agitated, although this time he was pretending to look away.

How quickly one learns this kind of deception! I, who had hitherto piqued myself on my honesty, trying indeed with a conceit on my name to make myself quoted as plain and pleasant, now found myself through that wedding morning pretending hardly to see Clair St. Leger beside me. Yet I was aware, with a sensitiveness almost painful, of his every movement; feeling when he now and then turned to speak in my ear with caressing, soft brevity, as if his breath wafted an atmosphere of love around me, while each syllable seemed full of musical intonation.

But I did not show what I had felt; no, certainly no one could have known! Already Clair seemed to have silently taught me to be careful. Then the breakfast was over—to me the wedding seemed a mad mingling of prayers, champagne, laughter, and tears; the carriage stood ready. My mother, who was beside me, visibly trembled for the first time that I could remember, looking anxiously at her eldest daughter. Alice was buried in a great hug by father, and when she reappeared again to view there were tears—not hers—on her face. She stepped smilingly into the carriage, handed by Beau; putting out her face past Sir Dudley to cry eagerly in a parting injunction to us all:

"Now, remember you are *not* to dance to-night! If I thought you were all dancing without me, I would *come back!*"

Then came a shower of rice; a volley of slippers; a masculine growl from inside the brougham, followed by rippling girlish laughter—and the play was over. We were dull that afternoon. The neighbours had all left us; we had heard the last of the sincere and insincere congratulations; and two silly old ladies who stayed to the very end had departed with the final observations that "marriages are made in heaven"—and that (smiling at Rose and me) "one wedding always brings another." All gone but ourselves, and the house party.

"Shall we sit out of doors on the lawn, under some tree?" I asked rather dolefully of Amy, the second Pawlett girl, whom I liked best.

She answered, pressing my arm with a quite unexpected friendliness in her dull expression, "Certainly": she was sure I felt lonely; then, in a whisper, added might she just let her mother know.

"Mamma; if you don't want me at all, Pleasance has asked me to go out with her."

"*Mamma* this!—*Mamma* that!"—scoffed Lady Pawlett, mimicking her daughter's humble tone with irritability, for the benefit of two or three married ladies of the Digges' root and branch, the Dean's and Rector's wives who were staying in our house. "Why can you not ask me a simple question, without dragging in a 'Mamma!' I wonder, my dear Mrs. Brown, that you allow your girls to call you always mother; as if they wanted people to think you a hundred."

"Oh! . . . I rather like my children to call me so," returned our mother in a very quiet voice; whilst I alone could detect disapproval of Alice's influential sister-in-law

under that graceful dignity of manner. Certainly, my mother was no older than Lady Pawlett, and had been far more of a beauty. Her light brown hair was as glossy as ever, her figure still slender, whilst the fair face never marked by passions, sorrows, or even keen excitement, contrasted in beautiful restfulness with her ladyship's bold black eyes, and made-up complexion and person.

One could almost fancy, now, she might tell herself, behind those discreetly lowered, gentle eyelids, that she might have flirted after marriage, snubbed her husband, and wasted his substance in extravagant living—seeking for and trying to keep admiration till at last competing with her own daughters; but that she had, on the contrary, always felt penetrated with her duty as a Beaumanoir, a wife, and a mother.

We two went quietly outside, and I led the way to a shaded sequestered nook down a steep slope of the grass terraces. Here, thank goodness! Lady Pawlett with her loud laugh and restless ways would hardly find us, if even—as often happened—she grew weary of her compeers' society.

"Where is your sister? Would she not have liked to come too?" I asked, though feeling still awed by the eldest of my especial guests.

"Oh, Charlotte, she is sleeping—at least, you know, she *says* she is taking a nap," replied Amy Pawlett, giving me an unusually confidential look.

"But I don't quite understand; why does she only say so?"

"Because then she is supposed to be harmlessly employed, and *Mamma*" (with sad bitterness) "does not torment her. She is really reading in her books of devotions."

"What, the Bible?"

"Well, no, not exactly. At least she does not quite tell me; and as I don't go so far yet in my views of life as she does, I don't ask. *She is preparing herself to leave the world whenever she can, I believe*"—in a mysterious whisper.

"Not to go into a convent!" I cried in horror.

"Either that or a sisterhood. I can't see much difference between them myself, but as it's wisest not to know what she means, I don't ask."

"But to put on that ugly dress and live in a bare cell till you die—to shut yourself voluntarily out from the beautiful world, and friends, and pleasures of every kind! Amy, it seems horrible to me—like slow suicide."

"Ugly dress, pleasures of society, friends," slowly uttered Amy; who, sitting bolt upright as I lay stretched more classically on the grass, bent sideways, now to pluck nervously little bits of grass; adding in a low tone: "Do you think really *our* lives are so pleasant that Charlotte need mind quitting all that? We are two plain, stupid girls with no fortune (yes, yes, we are!), and *Mamma* thinks our very existence a mistake and bother. You can see that for yourself."

"But still——" I expostulated, and then not knowing quite what to say next, paused.

Then came into my mind with a ridiculous force the fragment of a cradle-song, to which our old nurse had many a time gaily dandled us each in turn on her knee. It ran:

I won't be a nun,
And I sha'n't be a nun,
And it's nothing shall induce me for to ever be a nun!

I felt such a stirring of life within me at the bare idea of

convent cells, that I was quite sure nothing *would* induce me to ever be a nun.

"It is not even as if your sister had suffered any great sorrows. One could understand it in people who have," I next exclaimed, thinking aloud.

"How do you know?" simply returned Amy, now pulling daisies to bits with still averted face. And there was an unmusical though pitiful hoarseness in her slow voice. "One may be dull and plain, but still take likings; and then feel one's life only full of pain and disgust. Mind, I only say, *one may*! Somehow I can't give up hope altogether of my life changing to be at least a little pleasanter, some time. It's foolish, I know, so Charlotte tells me. She's stronger—but I'd rather be a housemaid than the holiest nun!"

"It's not foolish of you at all, I'm certain," hotly replied I. "We *ought* all to have hope; hope, faith, and charity—the Bible says so. Think too of Pandora's box! Oh, surely—surely each human being must have some happiness of their very own in life, one time or other."

"Ah, I don't know that. Not always worldly happiness," answered Amy Pawlett in a dreamy, heavy way, that a few days since I should have called dreary and sluggish.

Now I sat abashed beside this poor plain creature, who knew more of the secrets of life than myself; and I could have cried for her, though she did not cry for herself. No doubt I must have been in a melting mood that day; but the wrench of parting from Alice and what seemed to me "*the pity of it*!" had moved all my being. Perhaps the wedding associations and the many thoughts of past and future thereby engendered had equally betrayed Amy into weak womanish confidence; and that to-morrow she might be as solidified as ever,

and regret she had spoken unadvisedly with her lips. But I was glad to know she had a heart and brain like enough my own, though hidden inside that broad, graceless figure, with its dull-featured face and lack-lustre hair. And, fancy those Pawlett girls with their suppressed heartache eating such hunches of cake after a mountain of lunch, as they did at five o'clock tea !

Verily, thought I, the life of each of us is a romance, to ourselves ; and the dullest seeming might surprise the rest, if they could but write their own single story, as they each *felt it* ! with pens dipped deep into their own hearts'-blood.

"Why are you two sitting so sadly on the ground ?" broke in a gay voice behind us. And Clair St. Leger appeared, guided to our haunts by Bob, who was shaking the branches ridiculously in search of us ; whilst Beau followed a pace or two behind with a scornful manner.

"We both feel so quiet ; after a storm comes a calm, you know," I explained, as they lay down beside us.

"Well ; I feel as if we had all been in an atmosphere of champagne and orange-flowers, that has left a certain simmering excitement in the lightsome St. Leger not altogether disagreeable," said the owner of that name.

"And I," quoth Bob, with his wild eyes dancing, "feel as much off my head as ever."

"You may well say as ever ; though you did distinguish yourself to-day, catching your coat-buttons in Lady Pawlett's lace, upsetting soup over poor old Bee's solitary lilac silk, and nearly putting out Dudley's eye with the heel of that last slipper you threw," cynically murmured Beau, stroking his curved moustaches that just made a dark line against his cheek, as delicate as his pencilled eyebrows. "For my part, I am not worth sixpence."

Perceiving that my handsome brother was out-of-sorts—and as all the feminine portion of our family considered Beau in the light of a patronising young house-god, to be propitiated even to the self-sacrifice of all the virgins, if displeased—I tried to conciliate him by observing in a sympathetic whisper :

“I see you are low at losing Alice too, like me. It *does* seem such a pity ! doesn’t it ? ”

“Don’t be a romantic little fool, Pleasance,” returned my brother, in a flash of indignant contempt that startled me. “Dudley is a very rich man—that is the principal thing ; and a right good fellow, too. He and Alice could do a great deal, if they pleased, to help all of us ; including myself. You surely don’t imagine that their set in town will be like my poor mother’s quiet fogies, who were fashionable only when she was young.” (Beau always said *my* mother with unconscious emphasis as if he had more property in her than we ; a trick I have noticed in several maternal favourites. And he was the only one of us all who spoke of Sir Dudley with studious familiarity by name, without prefix.)

Seeing something was amiss with his friend, St. Leger, always good-tempered and willing to smooth matters for everybody, proposed we should all go for a walk.

“Not I, thank you, this hot day. Much better come and have a cigar in the shade of my den,” drawled Beau, rising, with ill-concealed annoyance.

“Why, my dear old chap,” said Clair good-humouredly, “I *have* been smoking for the last hour with you, so——”

So we started. Going along a narrow path through the thick shrubberies that stretched for almost a mile on every side round our house, and fringed the hanging

woods, Bob suddenly pinched my arm as a brotherly secret signal.

"Oh, don't, Bob darling; my arms are all black and blue already, and it looks so bad at night," I expostulated in a whisper, dropping behind with him a moment. "What is it?"

"I'm awfully sorry, old girl—but I say, what's wrong, do you think, with his usually Serene Magnificence?"

"I don't know."

"Well, I *think* I do. Do you remember his being equally genteelly savage about Christmas last, before he could make up his mind to tell about the lot of money he owed; though the dear old governor paid for him like a man?"

"Oh, Bob—how could he be in debt so soon again?"

"Whew! don't ask me," whistled Bob airily. "Of course I'm called the wild one of the family, and the March hare; still, I never understood how to make the money spin as royally as Beau does. I make a noise gambling for five shillings, and mother thinks me extravagant—she warns the pater! whilst Beau loses a hundred sovereigns in the most graceful silence."

At that moment Clair St. Leger looked back for me rather reproachfully. Clearly it had been no part of his intention, when proposing a walk, to pass his time with Amy Pawlett.

"Hullo! what sheep's-eyes that fellow does make at you!" muttered Bob jeeringly, adding: "He's like most of Beau's friends—rather too fine for me."

"Don't talk about what you don't understand, then, you dear old goose," I retorted, plucking up spirit, "but fly by the short cut to the schoolroom window, and bring out poor Rose. She must be so lonely, I know."

I knew; because having often felt lonely myself in that same prim prison of a schoolroom in which we grubs had been rigidly pent till we came out as butterflies. My own coming-out had not been hastened by Alice; indeed, even at her instance retarded by mother for a year or more, because I was still so thin and awkward-looking, as they both told me very kindly; and the glass had added this was then true. But Rose was neither shy nor wanting in colour and plumpness, so as I did not care at all to reign alone as Miss Brown, like Alice, it was my secret generous hope to hasten the emancipation of the family pet.

CHAPTER XI.

WHAT a merry walk—or rather, race—we had! The wedding afternoon that had been so dull was now changed into one of the merriest, most deliciously golden-winged evenings imaginable—to me at least!

With cheering halloos away went Bob, our leader, past our tiny Stoke hamlet; taking us all a merry scramble through copses where we startled the black-birds; out across corners of broadly hot fields; diving into cool woods again; plunging through fern-forests; scrambling up stony paths, and always surmounting innumerable fences.

And at all big fences, though I could jump like a bird, St. Leger sedulously begged of me not to risk a sprain, but to allow him to lift us down carefully. He

did take exceeding great care, certainly. Indeed, each time I found *myself* in his arms full two seconds longer than was strictly necessary; and felt relieved, with an inward flutter, that Bob was ahead—he was so severe in some ways, was Bob.

At last, when we had gone a mile of a chase through the country and were just re-entering Stoke woods again, after clambering over a last and easy enough stile, at which with real decision I rejected unnecessary help, St. Leger, who had nevertheless insisted on catching my hand, held it fast and quickly said: "Thank goodness! . . . The others are out of sight now; they are going straight back, and won't wait. *Do* let us sit here a few minutes . . . ; you will talk to me just for a little, won't you—*Pleasance?*" It had come to that word from him once or twice already; no further. But this time my name from his lips frightened yet delighted me as with dangerous sweetness, for I fairly trembled. And yet, with the lightning speed of thought, I asked myself, why be so fearful, when Alice had been assured enough? Oh, mine, mine should be a very different marriage from hers! We two really, *surely* did love!—I trembled with happiness and dared not think more. "Come!—sit down beside me," murmured St. Leger, inviting me to share the topmost rail of the stile. It was a perch more airy than easy; but no matter!—

For some little time neither of us spoke. His arm was round my waist, and I, being at so young and blissful a stage of my life, be it remembered, felt all my mind lulled in a delicious, strange day-dream of which Clair St. Leger's presence and embrace were the living fancies. The spot was a true lover's tryst too. They called it the Wishing-Stile in the country-side, for all the love-lorn maidens repaired here at sun-down to wish for their

hearts' desire ; and every lover and lass in the parish had worn the cross-bar smooth before us. Behind stretched a gorse-sprinkled common, bordered by wood, to the sky-line. Were lovers surprised by any figure coming across it, they easily escaped unseen by gossips into the steep wood through which a little path led, overhung by brushwood ; its track leaving an opening among the branches through which we now seemed to look downwards into the sunny glories of the opulent western sky. St. Leger's arm became tightened round me ; with a little murmur of dissent I ventured to beg release, yet alas ! not with a whole heart.

"Then you must call me Clair. Let me hear you—Will you?"—he caressingly urged, bending his head nearer mine. "Come ! I must go away to-night ; and that dear voice has never yet called me by my name."

"Going away !—to-night !" The ejaculations fell like snow-flakes from my lips, as if my happiness had been frozen on them.

"Ah ! you *are* sorry ?—Say you are !—No ? Well, selfish wretch that I am, I hope—I believe you are, dear child. Did Beau not tell you ? He got a telegram asking us both up to shooft in Scotland, so he wants me to start with him by the night mail."

"Ah !"—was all I murmured. But it seemed enough. For with a little flash of his eyes back into mine, and a tender exclamation, Clair caught me to him.

"I should have been *so* glad to have stayed !" he uttered passionately. And then before I knew, our lips met in a kiss that seemed to me the first one ever given on earth.

A few seconds only, but not another word between us two, had passed, when there came the sound of an inquiring "halloo" in the wood sent up after us. Clair

made a gesture of impatience, and tried still to delay me.

"We *must* go now and join them," I murmured, trembling with new-born love, but much troubled, too.

"Then this is our last meeting, *darling?*"

"I—I—suppose so.—Good-bye."

He caught my hand. "No; *au revoir*. I am asked back for your mother's ball here in September. Till then, *don't forget me* . . . promise you won't forget me, Pleasance . . . though I am such a miserable pauper."

CHAPTER XII.

THE sun was down; the moon rising slowly up; the stars were beginning to twinkle forth overhead, and the world of nature to be hushed in sleep.

I had stolen out in the warm night air; past the pebbled court under the house-eaves, to where beside an ivied corner of the furthest of our many cottage-gables, with its splashing little fountain sounding loudly in the twilight stillness, was niched a small hothouse. Stoke being built, or rather having grown, with such indescribable irregularity, it is hardly surprising that little gardens and glass-houses were likewise dotted hither and thither about its bower-like precincts. It might have been imagined the woodland home of several big children, who had played at having each a rival half-acre of Paradise; whilst their cottages seemed merely approaching each other for necessary protection, as the old Saxon

bûrs were once grouped round the central hall in the homestead.

Into this little glass-covered arbour I hied, looking eagerly round its blossomed walls. Not that I expected to meet any one !—No, *he* was with Beau, who for some inexplicable reason seemed moodier than ever, and hating his own company, gave it to his friend.

No ! we could not now meet again ; indeed, I felt still too agitated with this bewildering love almost to wish it—and all I was now seeking was a white rose-bud. Nothing more ; but then Clair (how I loved just breathing the name low within myself !) had besought me, as we left the stile and were following the others within frequent ear-shot down the winding path, to give him some keepsake—till we met again. “What shall I give you ?” I whispered back, reddening, being indeed the veriest novice in love.

He smiled, glancing admiringly at my coils of brown hair ; just touching them with his finger in the soft, mischievous way that made women allow St. Leger more such small liberties than other men, perhaps because he was so light-minded and playful that to take him to task seriously seemed to make too much of the matter ; or perhaps simply because he had a certain charm, privileging him to steal with laughing effrontery while others might not look over the hedge. There are such people ; and they have these inexplicable gifts we can all recognise, it may be with private envy—but dare not copy.

But this time I had drawn back, slightly wounded and affronted. A lock of my hair ! What right had he *yet* to ask so sacred a gift, as that should be, between lovers ? Oh, of course, I trusted him, if with a vague and troubled sweetness of trust, yet most confidently.

Had he not said, *au revoir* ? and though now he could not well say more with Bob and Rose sending us jeering outcries through the bushes to know why we tarried—*then, I knew what more he would say !* But as I drew back, shy and frightened, he said soothingly : “ What is the matter ? You are so sensitive, Pleasance. . . . Well, will you give me another white rose-bud ? ”

So I was searching now for one, since by ill-luck all those of our former bush were dead ; it seemed almost an ill omen as I saw a few ghostly petals glimmering in the dusk. But here, up overhead in the greenhouse, was an exquisite bud, all I or he could wish. As I stretched up to it, my father's voice sounded through the open glass-door. His favourite stone seat was just outside, in a recess of the house-wall ; so promising myself gladly a few minutes' pleasant chat with his dear old self—a pleasure stolen from his guests' rights—I still reached with difficulty for my bud. With more of a shock came mother's voice in unexpected answer :

“ I have come out, my dear William. I slipped away from the other ladies, knowing you wanted me ; as—as this is a matter—— ”

“ Of serious importance,” said father with great gravity ; for she had seemed to hesitate, even be troubled in her speech.

My hand held the bud now ; but even as it broke under my fingers I stood rooted to the ground, while a great expectant thrill of shame, pleasure, fear, and hope tingled up to the roots of my hair. For—it must be confessed—I thought, *perhaps Clair has spoken to father about me* ; and unable to move, speak, or think, though innocent of eavesdropping, I could not help standing motionless, and overhearing my parents.

Next instant, mother's voice entreating gently sent a

cruel shiver of disappointed counter-shock all through my being.

"You *will* pay the poor boy's debts, will you not, William? He should not be so extravagant, I know; but, after all, it is in such a gentlemanlike way; and really it is so hereditary in him, I believe he cannot help it. All my family did the same, and he is such a thorough Beaumanoir."

"Ada, Ada! is that all you can say in your son's defence? At least he might remember, I think, that he is wasting plain William Brown's substance: all that his father earned with hard toil," said my father very sadly.

I turned noiselessly to flee by the other glass-door, and hear no more of what was not meant for me; but it was locked. My mother's tones, a little sharpened beyond their usual low clearness by a sudden access of emotion, pierced my ears.

"Don't think I mean to depreciate your worth, my dear husband. Ah—I only wish that in some ways Beaumanoir *was* more like you." (This, of her idolised son, the image of her own ancestors! She could not have said more. I stood in despair, not knowing whether to show myself, to their annoyance, or stay still in the darkness and never reveal my unwilling presence.) Then mother added in beseeching feeling: "But still, say you will help him once again, for *my* sake if not for his. These losses in the business you told me of cannot be so very great; and I could not endure the feeling that my son did not pay his debts of honour."

"Dear, the business losses *are* severe, though I would not trouble you before by saying so, and trade is depressed. Then there has been Alice's marriage portion now, and the London house; besides that, this place is

expensive to keep up," returned father, more in deep grief than anger. "It comes to this, that as I dare withdraw no more money from our firm, to pay this frightful, this exorbitant sum of Beau's, I should have to touch what I had laid by for the other girls' fortunes."

There was a moment's silence.

"Father," I cried, my whole soul in my voice as I darted out to his side, "I am here! I was gathering flowers in there, and heard what you said without meaning to listen. Oh, yes; do take our fortunes—at least take *mine*!—don't trouble your dear self about that," and putting one arm round his neck, I kissed his head.

"You here, Pleasance!" ejaculated mother. Her vexation, I had foreseen, at being overheard was softened by quick satisfaction at my sympathy with her great heart's wish.

Still she added: "I am glad you show such a good feeling at once; but you ought not to have listened, or have been out in the hothouses so late. Now go, dear. You need not be so impetuous about this matter—as if your opinion or consent could influence your father."

"Pardon me, my dear wife; but this last is precisely where you must allow me to differ from you," said my father, in his slow, rather old-fashioned tone, whenever gravity made his natural courteousness preponderate over jollity. "In a matter like this, it almost seems to me, I would not dare to dispose of the future of Pleasance and Rose without their leave; for money might make or mar their lives. In any case, it would be an inexpressible relief to know they will not hereafter blame their old father."

Then putting his arm round my waist, he drew me

closer to him with great fondness, saying : " Come here, my tall daughter. So you really think you could face the world without fortune, do you ? Ah ! child, little you know yet. Well, well, well ; still, if God gives me leave, I hope to earn as much and more for you, darling. I am not an old man yet."

" No, indeed ;" thankfully murmured mother, who sat beside him. Then laying her white hand, flashing with diamonds through the dusk, gently on his : " And remember, dear, what the world thinks if such debts to friends are not paid ! It is sad and foolish in young men, I grant ; but still how many other sisters have to suffer likewise ! Your business habits and inclination to divide more equally between the children, and to think less of your eldest son than is generally the hereditary feeling of other landed proprietors, makes you too rigid, dear William. Believe me, it does."

There was a pause. All the time, my father had never taken his eyes off my mother's face with its pleading and still beautiful features. He smiled rather sadly ; against himself, as it were, for she had ever been the central object in life to him, and could move him as she wished—and she knew it—in almost all things. She added with a little sparkle of gaiety :

" Who knows ? Pleasance and Rose may both marry rich men who will want no portion with them : in fact, I *count* upon it. No doubt Sir Dudley would not have expected any with Alice, had he but known."

Father wagged his head with slow, dolorous humour.

" Don't be too sure of that, my dear. Sir Dudley, like all rich men, knows money's worth ; ' nothing for nothing ' is a very safe motto in this world."

My heart at this moment began to feel suddenly heavy and heavier, the elasticity in my body to relax ;

for in my generous heat and haste it had not struck me till now that *Clair was not a rich man!* My mother's laughing prophecy brought it to my mind.

"You are silent, pet," said father, laying his head against my shoulder; trying despite himself to be sportive, for he could not bear money matters to weigh heavily on us. "Are you repenting of your offer?"

"No, father," said I stoutly, which was true; then added, "only I have nothing more to say. You know all about it."

"Quite true. And now you had better really let her go indoors," interposed mother; "for," with a little sound of impatience, "who is there else to see after Lady Pawlett?"

As my father slowly freed my waist from his lingering clasp she added, moving nearer him and assuming quite a bright, businesslike air:

"Then—I have been thinking this afternoon, that my ponies could be sold; for, now Alice is gone, there is no one else to drive them for me."

At any other time, as I turned away, this last proposal would have given me a little stab in the heart; for I had been looking forward to driving mother, in my turn, in that same pony-carriage with secretly quite absurd elation. It was one of Alice's many privileges, which fond hope had confidently whispered would be part of my future promotion, as more my mother's companion and a being of consequence; one of the small consolations to set off against real sorrow at losing my sister.

Still—as I went indoors, holding my hand involuntarily over the precious bud hidden in the lace at my bosom, the ponies did not so greatly seem to matter. The glow of sacrifice had not yet died away to gray ashes within me!—only first ardour was cooling. And

then I shivered, for the night air seemed chilly, as if some dampness had come up from the lake. I was troubled ; but far nearer and heavier than Beau's debts pressed the thought that Clair St. Leger was going away before an hour. The other was a greater burden, but it might be laid aside for the present, at least ; it was on my brain even now, auguring unknown evils for the future ; but this other smaller trouble lay close on my heart.

"Whither in haste, fair lady? You come flitting out of the twilight eerily," said Clair's voice.

In the deepened darkness, I had not seen three figures smoking in the porch, as I approached.

"Yes ; she comes like a ghost. Pleasance, you're uncanny for the first time in your life. Let me turn you three times the wrong way of the sun," chimed in Bob, seizing me by the shoulders.

"Ought you to be neglecting your guests, by straying out alone in the gardens?" So said Beau ; carelessly knocking off his cigar-ash, and just looking at me with momentary criticising superiority from under his drooping eyelids.

"I was with father and mother ; they were talking to me," I answered, with a flash in my eyes and a little rush of colour to my face, as I looked at him straight. In my heart I was fond and proud of Beau, and believed he really cared for me too after his fashion, but he seldom deigned to speak to me except to notice some defects in my person or behaviour ; and just now this lordly air of infallibility from him was irritating. He was silent a moment ; then said :

"Are they out there now? I will go and find them. St. Leger, the trap will be round in ten minutes ;" so left us.

"What is this posy?" vulgarly demanded Bob; snatching at my precious bud with the freedom of a favourite brother, and the gambolling manner of a big dog. But he received a slap on his poor ear from my open hand.

"Go away; you shall not have it; you are such a rude boy."

"May I have it? I am really a very good boy," asked Clair behind, in his most mellifluous accents.

"Perhaps . . . I have not quite made up my mind, yet,"—in shy withdrawal; not really coquetry, but a doubt whether, after all, I ought yet to give him a token so lightly, although this afternoon he had—

"By all that is highly proper!" observed Bob execrately at this instant, "we ought to be going indoors to wait dutifully on the lordly will of our new relations; eh, Pleasance?"

Sighing acquiescence, I followed the good lad. But as we were going through the inner doors of the hall, I felt Clair gently possessing himself of my hand; a moment's pause, then he took the bud—he kept it;—that was all. A few minutes later, before my giddy head had got accustomed to the bright lights in our drawing-room, and whilst I was still forcing myself to offer agreeable little attentions and remarks to Lady Pawlett—who evidently thought it waste of time to answer, and was straining her eyes and ears waiting for Beau—there was a crash of wheels on the gravel outside.

Next came the little bustle of farewells. Our parents had entered with Beau, in whom I detected a suppressed air of relief; nay, almost intense thankfulness, I could fancy. He kissed me with light graciousness on my forehead, to my no small surprise (it was in

thanks for what I had done for him). Then they were off, the servants catching the last sound of their voices ; whilst I would have given so much to have been out there, and to have strained my eyes down the drive after them in the darkness.

Gone ! Yes ; Clair St. Leger was gone. But still, I felt so sure that when he came back in September, *he would ask me—— !*

In the days that followed, when the last wedding-guest had left us, we were somewhat dull. To be dispirited in fine summer days has always seemed to me double dreariness ; a shameful robbery of our due happiness of existence in the mere sunshine, which last is rare enough in Britain !

Bob had gone back to his army tutors to make gaily unwilling efforts to squeeze in among the lowest candidates at the next examination. The ponies had silently vanished. And Rose, too, had made a smiling sacrifice to Beau's debts. (This is worth recounting, as showing my little sister's practical character, for which we already admired her in our family.)

One day, after a long private interview in mother's boudoir, the nature of which I vainly guessed at, she came tripping out in a transport of joy ; and giving me a quick, small kiss on either cheek, exclaimed : " Listen what I've done, Pleasance dear ; you'll be as delighted as myself. I'm not to have a governess any more ! "

Then, in answer to my astonished inquiries, Miss Rose explained, that—meditating over the reductions which were being effected as privately as possible by mother—she had thought that her expensive governess might very well be parted with.

" She would only have stayed six months more, at

any rate, as mother promised to bring me out next season ; so it saves that much ; besides keeping the schoolroom maid to wait upon us both, and the separate meals, which must be a considerable expense—mother quite saw that," added Rose, wrinkling her firm little brow with the air of an old housekeeper. "Then, as I said, I can read two or three hours a day, French and German and *things*, with you, Pleasance ; because you are the cleverest of us all. Now, I know you'll be as glad as myself to have me at liberty," executing some small hops with a most sprightly air, I could never have imitated.

Glad!—of course I was glad. With Rose as my dear little daily companion, although I should certainly not reign in chief supremacy as Miss Brown, there was no longer any fear of being solitary. Perhaps I may have thought rather enviously a few moments that such a grace would never have been accorded *me* ; and that, on the contrary, for more than a year after the time when I might reasonably have been presented, my mother and elder sister had caused me (certainly under the kindest representations) to languish in schoolroom captivity. We all do have these sort of thoughts at times. It was wrong of me, but I was not at all perfect any more than most people ; still, being really properly ashamed of myself, these ideas were soon stifled. For Rose was the youngest, and had always retained her privileges as my mother's last baby and pet, whilst we others received justice and affection ; the latter seldom outweighing the former, except perhaps in Beau's case—and then he was the eldest son.

So Rose soon had the schoolroom converted into a private morning-room for herself and me ; and surreptitiously bribed my maid (now hers also) to lengthen

her dresses by a sly extra flounce. When my mother remarked it, Rose kissed and coaxed her, with explanations that she did not wish to be considered "out" any the more; but that short frocks made her feel awkward. Since the affair of Beau's debts our mother had grown somewhat silent, and unusually lenient or indifferent in small matters like this.

For myself, Rose's company cheered and kept me busy. Yet something was amiss. How golden those few days of Alice's wedding time had been!—but now I was always vaguely troubled and sad. It seemed to me, though I was still so young, as if there had come—

—a mist and a driving rain,
And life is never the same again.

Nay, nay! not a driving rain. I chid myself for such morbid fancy. A mist, perhaps—but who has not mists in their lives? And soon in September it would lighten, and raise, and brighten. For Alice had been promised her wedding-ball then, before Beau's troubles were surmised; and then would not Clair come to us once more, and all the world seem full of music and sunshine and sweetness again? And who knew—who knew then what he might not say to me?

CHAPTER XIII.

So September came at last, with its time of partridges and yellow stubble-fields; orchards heavy-hanging with ruddy apples; brambles glorious in all the hedgerows

with blackberries and bronze-tinted trails. It was a time of year to me always beautiful but sad hitherto, with summer's death—never before so secretly longed for day and night.

Alice had come back to us. We had looked anxiously to see what change marriage might already have made in her, not saying to each other our fears of the dulling effect of Sir Dudley's companionship. She seemed gayer than ever, however; or rather more excitedly determined to be gay, for Paris she declared had been too empty, and Switzerland too full for enjoyment.

"And now for my ball—who is asked to the house?" she cried, throwing herself heart and soul into the matter; as if she was still the most interested one of us all therein. So, while Rose and I recounted the names of the expected guests, she expressed satisfaction, or pouted in criticism.

"What a dull set of men you have asked—all either mamma's old beaux, or Bob's raw chums; *or, at the best*, Beau's friend Clair St. Leger—and you seem to admire him so much that no one else can get a word in with him, Pleasance," she ended very discontentedly. "Why on earth did you not tell Beau to ask them all for you, as unfortunately I was not here? His friends are nearly all of them afternoon-whist men; and not at all a marrying set; but still they would have *looked better* in the room."

"We have not seen Beau for some time—and father wished poor Bob for once in a way to ask whom he liked," I quietly answered, not entering into further explanations.

"And besides, Lady Digges, it is *Pleasant's* turn now, and mine, to play prime minister," interposed Rose with a bright little nod. "Pleasant has not been troubling mother for any favours yet" (no, indeed!

knowing Clair was coming), "but I mean to assert my rights soon."

"You chit! I have no doubt you will," laughed Alice good-humouredly enough. "Well, wait till you both come to stay with me at Broadhams in winter, and *then* you shall see what a country-house party I'll have!" Then turning to our grand-aunt, who was sitting beside us in the old school-room's privacy, but taking apparently no interest in the conversation: "Anyhow, Bee, you will bring the Duchess for me? You promised us that ever so long ago."

"Yes, indeed; you extracted that, and a nice worry it has given me to keep my word," retorted the old lady with a sudden flaring up of wrathful spirit, which showed her silence heretofore had been only dudgeon. "A pretty price I have to pay truly for the freaks of you Browns. I wonder why I take any trouble about you."

"But, Bee—dear Bee—you so often have the Duchess staying with you alone for a night or two; so we did not think it would have been any more expense to you," we all cried out together, aghast.

There followed in unanimous murmur: "If it is only money, and that you are doing it for our pleasure, *do* allow father——" (We all knew our old grand-aunt never had a spare sixpence; but at the same time her horror of receiving help from any of her nearest relations was quite a subject of delicate dread to them when longing to aid her.)

"Good gracious! do you think I wanted alms, foolish brats? No!—the price I pay is that of my pride, in bringing you a live duchess; for she instantly took a mean advantage, and declared she would only appear with me if I had a new dress. As if my dear old lilac

silk that I've had since your mother's marriage was not good enough for my friends, forsooth ! However, as I cannot afford any such unnecessary garment, the upshot of the matter is, that to please both you and her, she has worried me into accepting a wonderful patent gown invented by a German tailor she patronises. So there—see what I've done for you !” ended our grand-aunt, with a sound as of swallowed tears in her sharp, short laugh. Then, interrupting our discreet murmurs of gratitude and satisfaction, she added in a quaint grumble : “ But, if you think from that, I'm more likely to allow presents from any of *you*, you are all vastly mistaken. No, no : what friends give one looks at as a token of affection ; but from your kith and kin it has at once an air of necessitous support ; and when I can't fend for myself it will be time for me to go into my grave.”

“ But what kind of dress is this new one ? ” inquired Alice, judiciously avoiding discussion on the subject of giving and taking.

Said Miss Beaumanoir with a sprightly air :

“ Oh, an excellent plan, and one that just suits me. It's *reversible*, my dears. First it's a heavy black silk by day, then at night, turn it inside out, and there you are ! ”

“ Yes, there you are ; but what are you like ? ” I cried.

“ As fine as a jay ; crimson shot with gold,” returned my grand-aunt composedly.

In a day or two Bee went back to her tumble-down old country-house, to begin her baking and boiling for the Duchess, she said ; but before departure she confided to us in the privacy of the schoolroom that she meant to have more guests than the ducal lady only.

"I've asked some old friends of your father's, and his family; I've asked Mrs. Gladman and her son."

"The Gladmans—!" uttered Alice, parting her lips and raising her pretty eyebrows in undisguised astonishment.

"The Gladmans! We only ask them for small family parties," echoed Rose, pressing her mouth into a firm little button.

"Exactly so. I always liked them, and thought they had been rather neglected lately at your wedding, Alice. Yes, they're coming: I've just told your mother so, and she looked at me as if I was mad. But that is not all. I've another surprise for you in store—a young man is coming to me worth all the rest of your partners. What d'ye think of that?"

"Well, if he is not better than that good country booby, John Gladman, I pity the Duchess," said Alice, rather impertinently.

"He is of a great deal better family than your own husband; and let me tell you, the Gladmans, for the matter of that, are a fine old family, and far better than the Browns," retorted the old lady in a flash of wrath. "Pray allow me to decide who is fit to be asked to my house, and to meet my own friend."

Afterwards I succeeded in soothing her; but in vain tried to extract the name of the mysterious stranger, as Alice and even my mother, in agony of apprehension at Bee's vagaries, begged me to do. "For it is very odd that you seem quite her favourite, Pleasance," said my sister.

But our grand-aunt shook her head and was not to be cajoled.

"Trust me," she only said; "I never make a mistake about who are nice men; and this is just the

sort of man I would like *you* to like, Pleasance—worth three dozen of little St. Leger ; though he does very well *pour passer le temps.*”

Was that all, Aunt Bee? However, I did not think it worth while almost to heed what she said, for in two days was not Clair St. Leger coming? Clair St. Leger!—most musical of names.. I repeated it over and over, now and again, in my own mind ; and so by keeping my fancy always occupied with the one image—the same person—fancying a hundred ways of where we should meet, and how he would look, and what he would say—I fell deeper and deeper into the foolishly day-dreaming, unpractical state of girlish first love.

Then two days of nothingness, but that I felt waiting, waiting . . . had passed—

St. Leger had come with Beau.

CHAPTER XIV.

AND now it was night again.

In the solitude of my room that alone knew so much of my fond, mooning meditations of late upon my coming lover—the dear old room where I sat idly looking out of the deep lattices on high, down to the lake, so many afternoons when they all thought me busy as usual, embroidering or reading or drawing—in this room I was once more ; but now almost weeping !

So it fares in love. Clair had come this evening, but only to be hurried upstairs by Beau to dress for

dinner. Then quite late, after our solemn, smooth-faced, fat butler had announced dinner, he came in. One touch of my hand, hardly a look—no more. He had sat beside Alice, after taking in Amy Pawlett to dinner—for Amy had been asked back to us at my earnest request, I had so pitied her—and he had devoted himself to my sister all the time, hardly noticing my poor dull friend. Rose and I sat together, and I feebly tried to answer her bright little remarks sometimes; but my whole soul seemed occupied in trying to catch fragments of the talk opposite. It was all about Switzerland and Paris, where I had never been; and about people in town whom I did not know.

In my heart I almost regretted my kindness in getting Amy to stay with us; for otherwise *he* must have been with me, and surely he would, as of old, have preferred me to Alice.

Or, if mother had not asked that poor old neighbour of ours, who loved to call herself Mrs. General Jones—who was staring at Beau through her double eye-glasses, and talking volubly over her double chin—then Beau would have had Amy, whilst Clair and I——

No use thinking over all that now! After dinner, being a small party, we sat in the morning-room, which was supposed to be more cosy than the drawing-room, but was cut in two by a great round table heavily laden with flowers, lamps, and albums, against which Alice had often protested in vain. On this occasion fate played Lady Digges a good turn. She was on one side of the table, I on the other. What should Sir Dudley ponderously do, to my inner dismay, after dinner, but come in first, and heavily seat himself beside me on the very seat I had been secretly guarding for St. Leger! There was no more chance for me. When Clair came in, he gave

one quick look certainly in my direction ; then Alice beckoned to him, smiling prettily behind her large feather fan. As he took the seat beside her with that winning and pleased look I knew so well, and had hoped was more for me than any one else, my heart sank, and I grew so dull and absent that even Sir Dudley must have wondered at me. Presently Clair took Alice's fan into his own possession, as he had used to do with mine. It hid his face so that I could only now see a wave or two of chestnut hair on the top of his head ; and yet I felt constrained to look again and again at him by some fascination, though as furtively as I well could.

Just before we went upstairs for the night I might have easily moved a little and spoken to him. But my feet seemed rooted to the ground ; my tongue at the idea clove to the roof of my mouth ; and after all our easy, unshadowed friendship, the most horrible shyness came over me, as if he was an utter stranger.

Now—upstairs, I miserably reproached myself for my cowardice, for had we spoken together, I should at least have known if he had changed. As it was, we had certainly touched hands when saying good-night in the family group—but I could not be sure Clair *had even looked at me !*

What with the disappointment I would have been glad to cry, but was too self-ashamed to do so. After all, I had nothing positive to complain of. It was only fate—yes, yes ! that I reiterated to myself—only fate that had been against me ; and how school-girlish it was to imagine that Mr. St. Leger would not talk agreeably to any one else, when obvious little difficulties had intervened to separate us ! So trying to reason with myself, I lay heavily down, but not to sleep for long hours, and even then to dream only of vague trouble

and disappointment. After such sweet anticipations, it was a sorry night indeed.

Next morning with daylight my courage returned marvellously. It seemed so weak of me overnight to have succumbed to the very first obstacles fortune had ever opposed to my intercourse with Clair St. Leger.

Of course, things could not always go as I exactly wished; but one must be strong and bear that. The time seemed very long to my troubled heart, however, for the male half of our guests were all out shooting most of that day; and much as Alice tried, my mother's notions of propriety forbade our being allowed to lunch with them.

Once or twice, at breakfast and after, Clair might have said just a word or two to me aside, I fancied—but always some one or other came between us. No matter; I was still resolute to make allowances, and be wise and patient.

By evening came my reward.

Passing through the inner hall, I met him at last coming in, hot, tired, but well pleased apparently with his day's sport. "Well, Miss Pleasance," he exclaimed, with the old voice and smile; coming slowly towards me, as if weary-footed but still determined on a talk, "and what have you been about?—you have hardly given me a word since I came."

"That was not my fault, Mr. St. Leger," said I; trying to smile as lightly as if my heart had not been yesternight so heavy, and so bitter against him.

"Meaning it was *my* fault, I suppose! What an air of gracious haughtiness you say that with," murmured Clair, in half-soliloquy, looking full in my face, so that I was afraid my cheeks were growing warm in self-betrayal, and returned eagerly:

"I did not say so. I never said such a thing."

"No; but some people's looks are so eloquent. . . . Come, forgive me this once, for it was really not my fault. Your sister called me over to talk to her; and she very kindly asked me to stay at Broadhams next month. *You* will be there, won't you?" His voice had suddenly become tender and pleading, though he looked round as if especially careful not to be overheard.

What could I say? I tried to look down and say nothing beyond the vaguest assent; but my heart was softening, and he must have known as much, for he went on hurriedly:

"Last night we were too small a party! Every word one said was overheard all round, and I hate that; but to-night you will have more people, so then—Anyhow, promise you will have four, no, five dances with me to-morrow night at the ball."

Oh, silly, silly girlhood! That request made me so perfectly happy, that with beating pulses and a new warmth all through me, I slipped upstairs to be glad a few minutes alone.

We were indeed a large party that evening; so large that Clair's prophecy came untrue, for somehow we always seemed separated—what with my duties as eldest daughter of the house, and his being such a universal favourite. But, nevertheless, this night I lay down almost happy again in anticipation; even glad of those few words we had had together.

It was very different, truly, from all I had dreamt through the dying summer. Yes! But the deadening disappointment of last night had shown me how foolish had been the exaltation of my former hope. Now, I was sadder and wiser, but still resolved to trust implicitly in Clair St. Leger.

CHAPTER XV.

Last night, as to the trembling lute,
The dance gaed thro' the crowded ha'.

OUR ball had begun ; oh, what a delightful one it was .

To the first thrilling twang of the opening waltz, played by the best band all over west of England, Clair St. Leger and I had skimmed away over the polished floor of the ball-room that was like black ice this night. The guests were coming thick and fast, all in best dresses and highest spirits. For balls were then rare around us, and much to be enjoyed ; so every one came with a determination unto that same, which the hosts helping meant "go," that communicated like magnetism to the crowd. An old ball-goer would have known at once that the night would be a success. Bob's friends had *indeed* come down to stay with us in force ! A body of strong, shy youths, who blushed and laughed uneasily whenever one of our sex spoke to them, but watched ladies steadily with big eyes all the same. They one and all worshipped the March hare as their leader ; and after some awkward but ineffectual attempts to divert my attention from Clair St. Leger to their joint selves, chose Rose as their divinity and type of a "jolly girl," rather to my Bob's chagrin, who could not understand why I did not get on better with his chums.

Too truly, as Alice had prophesied, mother's contingent were indeed rather ancient Lovelaces, somewhat dyed and padded, and well aware what they were about. In consequence, they devoted themselves to a man to Lady Digges, the future ruler of the Broadhams' big house and winter shooting ; who, for her part, merrily accepted their laboured devotion—*faute de mieux*.

And therefore—and therefore—not to my sorrow, I was somewhat less sought out to-night than either of my sisters.

We danced in the great dining-room, seldom used. It had been the old Saxon hall in long bygone days, so that no ceiling intervened between the dark oaken floor and the arched rafters of its lofty roof, that sprang in bold outlines above the fine later carvings panelling the wainscoted walls. Lofty, severe, and sombre in general though it was, to-night the old hall was flooded with light. There were tapers, tapers, *everywhere*, in Milky Ways and constellations of brightness. There were stacks of hothouse flowers, and beds of roses filling every window-niche and carved nook. The old Bracy banners *meanwhile*, depending from the walls, frayed and time-worn, lent a more solemn beauty to the scene; yet they were in keeping with the traditions of the hall, where they looked down on the festivity of this last human generation into whose ownership they had passed.

Without doubt Stoke was a gem—an ideal home this night. My heart swelled with just pride as I gazed round at what seemed dream-rooms of brilliance or shadowed delight—for was it not entirely to my dear father's credit that our ball was so beautiful? He had arranged it all himself, and no one had better taste.

The same thought was in St. Leger's mind too; for as we paused he exclaimed, with a little genuine outburst of admiring envy: "What a charming old place yours is, certainly! Your father *is* a lucky man. Look at him now, receiving his guests, the perfect picture of an English country squire—and then he is not troubled by having acres without the money, like so many. Ah! any one can see that he has everything wealth can get,

and, besides, all it so often does *not* know how to get. No lack of the golden showers here !”

It was on my lips to say something in half protest against our supposed riches, as the remembrance of a summer night's scene in our garden came vaguely back to my memory. But I looked at my father standing up so straight and broad, for all his short stature—ruddy of face and silver of hair, without a trace of trouble on his dear broad brow—and then all shadow of possible coming care died away within me.

This night was too happy a one ! I was with Clair, and would be with him again and again ; and all through my being was a vague, delicious dreaminess of satisfaction in which thought happily died.

My mother stood queen-like at the door, shimmering in diamonds and satin gloss, and robed in costly lace. Every now and then I could detect father stealing a glance at her—and then round at some of us—with such fond, though partly-concealed, pride and affection. Clair saw it too ; perhaps his eyes were guided by sympathy.

“Yes,” he murmured. “Few men have such a charming wife at her age, two such good fellows for sons, and such perfect daughters. Or” (lowering his voice), “to say what I think—*such* a perfect daughter !”

It was the old tone, the old look ! I called them old, and yet they had been but those of a few happy hours last summer. Feeling utterly blessed, but unnerved, I looked down, trying to hide my happy smile and the blush that was self-felt, I trusted, rather than shown, while my heart quickened its beats.

At this moment, as the first waltz ended, a sort of thrill seemed to stir the crowd near us at the doorway. A line of footmen's heads, culminating in the naturally-

frosted pate of our sleek chief butler, could be seen in a file down the outer hall to the entrance-door. And though mother never stirred a hair's-breadth from her due post, yet by the forward bending of the bodies of the meaner folk around, making a wave-like movement on either side of a Red Sea passage the crowd reverentially left, I knew the Duchess—the glory of our countryside—was coming.

"The Duchess of Westerton, and Miss Beaumanoir!" was indeed sonorously announced immediately; some meaner sound then followed as of the Gladman name, soon lost in the ducal reverberations.

"Whew! the Duchess, *and* the Queen of Sheba!" exclaimed Clair, transfixed, while he and I gazing from afar beheld a sight advancing that outdid speech.

"Oh! glory, hallelujah!" whispered Bob, as springing across the room he came to pinch my arm fraternally in the most delicate portion of its softness, that I might partake of his secret joy. 'Come nearer, Pleasance, my child, come nearer; I would not miss this sight for a thousand pounds."

In the twinkling of an eye, likewise, we found Alice by our side; her eyes as big as saucers, and her mouth quivering with laughter. Rose, too—peering with bright determination over unkind shoulders that were taller than her eyes, unless she stood on tiptoe. We were all there to do Bee honour, excepting Beau, who, as Bob disgustedly murmured, with a backward glance of his eye, was doing "the grand" in an attitude of elegant expectancy in the middle of the hall.

The Duchess advanced, a ponderous figure in dark-blue velvet, smiling around with the affable condescension of her conscious rank, and the good-humoured unction of all stout people. But she was almost blotted

out of our visions next moment by the weird little figure behind her in a blazingly gorgeous red dress of dresses ! It seemed to swallow its small wearer in folds of flaming splendour, and trailed behind in yards of wastefulness. So old Miss Beaumanoir clearly thought, for already she was giving the tail thereof some spiteful kicks ; and with her shoulders hunched up, and her black eyes searching the crowd with a sort of angry defiance, our grand-aunt looked really rather like a witch at the stake.

Then two large, motherly hands caught one of mine, and a kind voice that I had not heard for nearly three years whispered in my ear :

"Pleasance, my dear child, how lovely you look ! I had no idea you had changed so from my pale little school-girl friend."

"Oh, Mrs. Gladman," I murmured back, meeting with deprecating pleasure the kind glance of my good godmother. "No one else thinks so, I am sure ; at least, hardly any one else."

"Perhaps not every one ; it might be a matter of divided opinion ; but *I* think so, at least."

"I am so glad to see you again ; it seems such a long while since——" (Thereupon, an uncomfortable pause might have suggested that it was our fault as a family that we had not seen Mrs. Gladman of late.)

But that most forgiving of dear women comfortably answered :

"Weil, it is some time, dear ! But once Alice came out, that was quite natural ; for your mother has had to begin a gayer, more fashionable life, and you had to be strictly finished in the schoolroom—while I have been leading my usual existence of a country vegetable."

It gave me real pleasure to see that, although she so

miscalled herself, hardly one of our company, not excepting the Duchess, had a better air or presence than Mrs. Gladman herself. Dressed very handsomely, though quietly, she still enjoyed a large, fair comeliness. It gave a charm as of surprise at seeing such beauty of health.

"But where is John? I want you to dance with him, dear; if only to give my eyes the pleasure of seeing you both together," she went on, looking round.

She had only a very little way to look. Standing bashfully behind some strangers—among whom he had allowed himself to be entangled, having drifted from his party—was a well-fed-looking and handsome, countrified young man, steadily gazing at both me and his mother through round black orbs.

Mrs. Gladman started at once to recover her son from his captivity among the stranger skirts he seemed afraid to tread on. Meanwhile I found Alice energetically stabbing me in the side with her fan (a little attention she would have loudly protested against, had I ever dreamt of returning it).

"Who *is* that other man Bee has brought with her? He is the only man in the room I am dying to dance with; such a good air, and so fine-looking. She is bringing him up to *you*, the little wretch! Pleasance, like an angel, pass him on to me."

On the other side of me, Bob had also suddenly begun renewing his friendly pressures of my elbow, this time so excitedly that I winced, feeling convinced that all secret pride in the whiteness of my arms would be ruined for the evening.

"Pleasance, I say!—don't you remember? Doesn't something remind you of——?"

But I could neither attend to him nor Alice, for at

that moment my grand-aunt advanced upon me, and snatching at my hand as if her fingers were talons, exclaimed—energetically holding her prey at half an arm's length—and turning towards a tall, fine-looking man behind her :

“Here she is, Fulke. Here, Pleasance, is a partner for you. Many a time I have nursed him on my knee in this very house ; where he had then a better right to be than even you have now.”

The new-comer said, in a deep, pleasant voice which somehow seemed not quite unfamiliar, bringing some vague memories as of a pleasant dream : “This is not quite the first time that I have had the pleasure of meeting Miss Pleasance Brown ; though”—looking at me with a kindly smile lighting up good gray eyes—“I dare say you have quite forgotten me and Dartmoor, as I should hardly have recognised you in the change of finding a grown-up young lady.”

I stammered over an answer, puzzling my memory tantalisingly but vainly, when Bob, who had been craning his long head and neck forward to examine the stranger inquisitively, suddenly thrust a yard's length of arm and hand between us, exclaiming with a cry of joy :

“I knew it—I thought I knew you from the very first. Shake hands. How are you—how are you? Why, Pleasance, don't you remember Mr. Fulke?”

“Mr. Fulke !—of Chagford?” I repeated, in a maze.

“I don't know what you and Bob mean with your Mr. Fulke,” interposed our grand-aunt brusquely, as if she thought us both crazy creatures. “But, anyhow, his proper name is Mr. Fulke Bracy, the last of the Bracys of this very house of Stoke-Bracy.”

CHAPTER XVI.

THE night was half-spent. But our ball was not flagging at all ; rather, as supper began in the lighted-up conservatories, the dancers sped round with fresh vigour in the clearer space of the great hall.

Every one seemed happy, all amused.

As I was resting beside a pillar with Mr. Bracy, after our first dance together, we detected Mrs. General Jones and another old busybody carefully threading their way down the side of the hall ; their eyes fixed on the walls with curious intentness, though discreetly ; and their lips moving. " One hundred and eighty-nine," we heard murmured sagaciously as they passed us. " Are you taking that chandelier on the far side, my dear Mrs. General ? One hundred and ninety-five already, I do declare, and real wax every candle of them."

" Well, well. No one can better afford it than dear, good Mr. Brown Sugar, as they call him ; and a very good name too, considering his sweetness of disposition," placidly returned the she-general.

Mr. Fulke—as I still secretly call him in mind—met my eyes, and we both laughed. It was now the middle of the ball, but this was the first dance I had in honesty been able to give him, to my regret. Alice, however, had unscrupulously thrown over her other partners to dance three times already with him ; assuring every one she talked to that night, in her impulsive childish fashion, that he was the most fascinating man she had met with *for ages* !

" There certainly is a different *régime* here from what I remember in my young days, of our troubled fortunes. I can truly assure you that I am glad the old traditions of Stoke are so delightfully revived, for your family's

sake, as well as that the dear old place is so well kept up," said Mr. Bracy, with an earnest tone running through the well-bred, easy lightness of his speech. It told me he was keenly sensible of the feeling that he was here, a stranger, dancing in the home of his forefathers, but would not allow himself to weigh on our sympathies at all, for that.

It would have given me real pleasure to have said a word or two, showing him I could enter a little way into the mingled crowd of memories, regrets, and associations I felt certain he *must* feel ; but foolish shyness weighted my tongue. The thoughts were all in my head. I could have almost spoken them with my eyes, loving Stoke's every stone and tree and grass-blade as I did, and so intensely pitying him ; my heart was so soft and wide-set this night with my own vague gladness I would have had all the world as happy. But not a word of what would have been graceful to utter would come, though I did look up at him. At last, after a pause, came merely the blundering question : " I beg your pardon—but why was it you called yourself only Mr. Fulke on Dartmoor ? "

" Did I call myself so ? I think rather that it was Mrs. Gladman who used to address me so by my Christian name, having known me very well ; whilst with Jack there was no mistering, but he called me ' plain Fulke '—as a mother once said with pride of her ugly son, when the neighbours called him Johnny or Jack, ' His name is plain John. ' "

My old friend laughed at his simple tale himself—it may have been to hide some amusement at another thought—but that did not strike me at the time, so I answered staidly :

" It was my mistake, and Bob's then. How silly you must have thought us ! "

Fulke Bracy turned quickly to look at me, and my good faith seemed to beget his, for he immediately apologised.

"Not quite so ! To confess all, since you look at me in such an intensely truthful way yourself, the mistake once begun, I rather wished to encourage it. I own (being now cured, and ashamed of the feeling) that at that time the memories of Stoke were still so sore and dear to me, that though it was a delight to hear you both constantly praising and describing it, there was a relief in your not knowing me as its unfortunate exile."

"Oh, Mr. Bracy, I *am* so, so sorry——"

"Thank you very much ; you may be sorry for me now, since it gratifies without grieving me. I do assure you, it quite gladdens me to see Stoke in the possession of such a man as your father, whom I had never met before. We have just had a long talk together ; and he has taken me so kindly round the rooms to see his few changes. He did it with a thoughtfulness I shall never forget."

"Dear father ! that is so like him," I cried, lighting up with animation, and a flush of pleasure.

"Why, there ! Now I recognise you again as the excited young Atalanta of our otter-hunt," returned my old friend with the new name, his face brightening and his manner unbending also. Now I remembered how handsome I had thought him ; and was not surprised at Alice's present infatuation, for he *was* a very good-looking man. He went on : "Do you remember that morning when I found you water-bound on a rock in the Teign——?"

"Yes, yes, Mr. Bracy ; and do *you* remember how you brought me back to Wheatfield Farm on the pony, and the mornings we all three went fishing, and—— and——?"

How eagerly we went on chatting together, each rousing the other to fresh pleasant recollections! When at last, in the first pause, we both succeeded in securing ourselves another dance out of the pencilled imbroglio of my card, it was with the most mutual good-fellowship and genuine gladness at having, as it were, found again our old friendship intact though so long forgotten.

Then came John Gladman. He lumbered round the room holding me in a hot, tight grasp. This only grew tighter and tighter, as I found it more and more difficult to move. He, too, said: "How awfully this reminds me of our jolly days down at the old farm—eh, Pleasance!"

"Does it?" I just let fall from my lips, glancing rather primly round, for mother might be near; and *Clair was!* And both in their several minds might think strangely of hearing John Gladman call me *Pleasance* in his big-baby fashion. Besides, my toes were pounded to a sore jelly, and my beautiful white dress—a Parisian dream, over which Clair had just raved—was being ill-used if not absolutely torn by John's plunges into battle, as his dancing resembled. So I just added, my words unconsciously freezing to ice-drops: "I am greatly surprised you remember me so well at all."

"Oh, but come now!—that otter-hunt! I don't forget how splendidly you took your fences that day. There never was a girl more after my heart than you were then. Besides, if even I had been likely to forget you, mother would have kept me up to the mark. And I say, Pleasance" (blushing considerably) "how awfully pretty—no, not that, but something more—you've grown. You don't mind my saying that? Oh, come, for auld lang syne's sake, you know—and I've been watching you

from a distance all the evening ; on my word of honour I have. You're so like some of those quiet Madonnas, or nymphs, I used to see in the galleries when I was abroad."

John had once been "abroad," as he called it, from Paris to Dresden, and would probably remain contented therewith, and refer to that time of vast experience all his life.

Now, to my annoyance (much as I really liked him), he pleadingly ended. "And look here, Pleasance, you will give me another waltz, won't you? A square?—I hate them! This next one, now . . . I'm certain there was nobody down for it on your card when I tried to take a peep a few minutes ago. There *is* nobody else—is there?"

"The next is my dance, I believe; is it not, Miss Brown?" said St. Leger's voice just then quickly, with a flash as of jealousy in his eyes, as passing he bent them on me.

And I—knowing it was the last one unappropriated on my discreetly-guarded card (having refused dozens of ineligible suitors), and one more than Clair had even ventured to ask at the beginning of the evening—acquiesced by a silent gesture with inward tremorous joy. How glad I was then that Bob's adoring satellites—all the athletic young "wet-bobs" and "dry-bobs" who followed him as their leader with hero-worshipping eyes—had chosen Rose unanimously for their bright little goddess rather than my colder, paler self.

Instead of dancing, Clair led me straight away through the conservatories to our fernery; and I went as if in a dream. In the distance among palms, flowers, and lights, we saw all the earthlier mortals supping—father, mother, with the Duchess and her nearest in rank, at a

larger one among many delightful, mushroom-like tables for two, that were dotted fairy-fashion about the glass-houses. My sister, Alice, and Mr. Bracy were at one of these latter, *tête-à-tête*; and as we softly passed by, I was aware—without much heeding it—that my old friend looked up and saw me.

In the same way, I seemed to know that Clair was watching his opportunity to avoid my mother's quick-eyed observation; but neither did this trouble me. He must be always right in my love-bewitched eyes, except, indeed—when he neglected me *too much*. The fernery was the greenest, coolest, stillest of retreats. Hidden, as it was, far, far away at the end of a suite of hot-houses which made quite a small winter garden, we found nothing and no one there save ourselves and the gold-fish swimming in their dimly-seen basins. Tree-ferns, whose great fronds drooped in feathery screens; groves of small up-springing palms; smaller ferns fringing the walls in close luxuriance on all sides of us; creepers trailing, twining, and hanging down overhead and on all sides of us. It was green, dim, everywhere around!

Only two lamps softly half-lighted our bower; showing us, however, all we then seemed to care for—that was, each other. The atmosphere was lulling and fragrant. Only our two selves! and the plash of tiny waterfalls for all sound, babbling unseen amongst the foliage. We sat, side by side, on a low couch (I can remember still the Indian gold-worked cushions on it); and for a perceptible time neither of us spoke.

I could not think, could not find a word to break the strange silence, but felt only happy; in a dream; and waiting. Clair's eyes were bent down, too; and supposing he was dreaming like myself, I was satisfied.

To my surprise, when he looked up and spoke, it was with an entirely new tone—partly deprecating anger as of one who has no right to be angry; partly a kind of tender jealousy.

"Who is this new swain of yours, this Gladman who calls you *Pleasance*!—and whose mother seems to consider you her especial property, by the way she watches you? He is an only son, I believe; and rich, no doubt—lucky dog!"

"What is that to me? They are only dear old friends of long ago——"

"Only! Is that all—are you sure? Ah, *Pleasance*, *Pleasance*, you were not so ready to let me call you by that dear name; but then I am—a genteel pauper! So society would say, at least."

He looked away with such a thoroughly miserable expression, that in the tenderness of my heart, being still a mere child in such experience, it pained me almost as much as himself to see him suffer. In my eager impulsiveness to comfort him, I hotly explained:

"Listen, *Clair*! you are altogether wrong. Mrs. Gladman is my godmother—and John Gladman, and Bob and I, were all three of us together down near Dartmoor at their home. Oh! it is years and years ago; it must be three or four years. That is all."

St. Leger looked at me softly, as if intensely relieved; and then, despite some protesting efforts on my part, possessed himself gently of my hand; and keeping, caressed it.

"Dear little hand! . . . Then he is not my favoured rival yet! Ah, *Pleasance*, if only I dared hope that no one else would be; though I am a selfish brute to wish it," he murmured lovingly. My brain seemed on fire: I did not understand him. *Surely*, he felt strongly! Yet

he spoke of what seemed death or life to me—and of his own love and misery—always in the same light-touching tone of graceful joy or gentle regret.

"He will never be your rival, unless *you* wish it!" burst unawares from my lips. Then I did not know how I could have said such a thing; scarcely knew indeed what I myself really meant.

"Never! . . . promise me that, Pleasance! So you do really care for me, after all, darling—my own darling," exclaimed Clair, with a sudden excitement which he had hitherto kept well in hand.

And then the memory of the Wishing-Stile last summer seemed to steal over us. Clair's arm drew softly round me once more; and for some little time "the beating of" our two hearts "was all the sound" we heard. When at last my lover spoke again it was to bewail his lot. All that was in his heart was uttered! . . . He was passionately in love with me—and yet—and yet—it was with intense self-pity, and towards me lamenting fondness.

"I am the most miserable wretch alive! If only I dared ask you to have me, Pleasance; but it would be downright folly at present. . . . I could not do it, as things stand. Ah! if only I were like that fellow Gladman; well off, and with no cares or trouble. It is a wretched world! . . . Why have such good-natured boobies always the best of it in life?"

"You are wrong. John Gladman is little, if at all, better off than yourself," my tremulous lips framed with difficulty; "only he is *content with what he has!*"

"Yes, yes: any man is rich, I suppose, who has next to no wants. But, Pleasance, dearest, is it my fault that since I was a mere boy I have been thrown into society, where I *must* say" (with graceful deprecation) "I am a

favourite? And now all the extravagant habits one learns from the fruit of the tree of knowledge have become my second nature. What is it? . . . don't move! You shall not go away. No, no, you are fast held; I defy you to leave me now. And—and, look here, my own Pleasance, I am ashamed of being such an idle drone. I must work—I will work! As soon as this winter's shooting is over, I will *really* try and get something to do. Besides, you would not have me miss the party at Broadhams, for you and I are to meet there again" (playfully). "So now, you are more willing to stay with me, my white angel. What tyrants some women are! and fond of making us slaves, aren't they?"

It was true, those last words had made me *more* willing to stay. Willing!—as if my heart was not all too traitorously willing; whilst pride and discretion kept tormenting me for having so fallen away from my old allegiance, whispering that it was all wrong and foolish—the self-lowering of my womanhood—to have so let this man gain assurance of my love from my own lips, and yet to be no more to him than before.

Yet what could I say?—never tell him how gladly I would marry him, poor as he was. Why! . . . he did not *want* to know it!

And till now, how could I have found inward strength to send him away, believing in his true attachment as I had—as I did?—But now I really felt again a frightened child; bewildered by new problems, new views of life, in which this my lover alone offered himself to my troubled mind as philosopher, confidant, and guide.

So I was wretched in my happiness, yet in pride could not reveal it. Ah! still trustful of Clair, though

troubled ; mortified, yet proud of his love. It was all like a heavy, sweet dream—of which one knew the wakening must be bitter disappointment, so would not break the soft-enthraling spell. Nothing was real but the present ; the future a chaos of doubt—a quicksand of hope. My lips smiled in fond trembling at Clair St. Leger, lovingly obeying the unspoken command of his smile ; yet I gazed past his dear head miserable-eyed. Since summer to have hoped so much—to have so longed for this meeting, day and night, and night and day ; and now, what had come of it ? With hope deferred till December again, my heart was sick.

All I vaguely knew was, that Clair was trying to explain his affairs to me. But indeed these seemed so involved to himself, no wonder they confused me. He once had good interest—had been offered very fair openings in life, in his first youth, so he said ; but in boyish love of his liberty refused them all, thinking *then* he had enough to live on and enjoy himself. Would there still be a chance for him in this or that line of life, he wondered ? There might ; or might not. Then there were other things ; but these required examinations—and whether such a lazy blockhead as he was could now acquire the knowledge necessary in most situations ?—*there* was the question !

All this I vaguely heard him say, perceiving with woman's instinct that he did really love me ; yet that he had a deadly hatred of the idea of work, as work. It made me sorry for him, and half ashamed that I should so wish him to drudge, to fetter his free, merry life for my sake ; yet I did wish it !

And so at last out of this whirlpool of loves, doubts, and fears, this only rose clear to surface, that Clair—for my sake !—would not ask me to engage myself to him ;

but trusted in my assurance that no one else should have "his place ;" next we were to meet at Broadhams and—be happy. In the meanwhile he declared with a sigh he must, and would indeed, look out for work in earnest.

Suddenly we started and drew apart, aware of an unusually firm footfall approaching. It was Mr. Bracy.

To this day I cannot guess, well as I later came to know him, whether he wished to warn us or not. He was a man whose firm-set face and close-locked, large mind could hold many secrets, large and small, but would betray none.

All he said was, in a pleasant voice: "I am really sorry to ask you to come back to the hot ball-room, Miss Brown; for you must be glad of a few moments' rest, after all your exertions to make us all enjoy ourselves. But this dance is mine—and what is more important to you, no doubt, your mother has been looking for you."

At that, I started with a guilty feeling. "My mother! Did she—did she ask you to find me?"

"No. I only happened to overhear her asking others. So, thinking I had seen you come in this direction, I came to search on my own account; hoping you would forgive me, if you are tired and would rather stay here."

"Oh no—yes! I mean I am *very* glad you came—that is" (seeing that as he went away he looked amused, but dubious), "I should have been very sorry if you had not."

Even as we approached the dancing-hall, we heard the last bars of the music dying away. How I had forgotten time in that far-away green fernery! But Bracy would listen to none of my hesitating apologies; putting

them aside as an ancient man might those of a mere child.

"Stay, and let me look at these pictures in the inner hall—I am glad of an opportunity," he said. "Ah, yes! these four dear old ancestors of mine. They seem to look at me again with quite friendly, recognising eyes. See, Lady Betty there, by Kneller; now that you are grown tall, and in your white dress to-night, I believe you have a resemblance to her; why, yes, you have."

"That is too flattering, Mr. Bracy; but it sounds unlucky, she died so young."

"And in the height of her happiness; better that than to have waited for the sorrows of life, Miss Pleasance—may I call you that, for old acquaintance' sake?—it-always seemed to me such a pretty name that it is a pity to hide it in Miss Brown."

He was still eyeing the four beautiful full-length portraits around, with such wistful looks, though trying to talk lightly to me, that I exclaimed with all the sympathy of voice for the Mr. Fulke of former days which had till now been pent-up in my heart:

"What a shame it seems for us to have them here!—And what a pity you did not take them away with you, when you had to leave the dear old house!"

"They are fixtures in the wainscot and could not well be removed; besides, where could I find room for them in my bachelor's crib? It would be a worse puzzle than the Vicar of Wakefield's family panorama," he laughed, looking with renewed interest down in my face. Then he added: "Thank you for your kind fellow-feeling all the same! It has done me good; though I hope you are the only person here to-night who knows, or fancies, I have any regrets for the past."

"But I may be really sorry for you, as we are old

friends ; indeed you must allow me, for I *am* so sorry," I timidly entreated, though pressing the point. For where an old friend is poor and proud, one must insist sometimes on giving sympathy.

Bracy quickly put one hand a moment lightly on mine which lay on his arm. "The same good heart as when you were a child ! . . . If even we never meet again—yes, Miss Pleasance, I shall be very glad if you will still think of me as an old friend."

As he ended, an ebb-tide of departing guests flowed out into the inner hall, where we were. Seeing Fulke Bracy with me, one and all came up especially to shake him by the hand. It was, "My dear Fulke"—all round—"When are you coming back to these parts ? . . . and next time will you stay with *me* ?—And with us !—And with us !" He could hardly answer them all. His arm was nearly worked out of its socket by the friendly old squires, and his hand continually being held in warm, prolonged clasps by the squires. Clearly Fulke Bracy had been the lion of the evening ; the one man about whom all would talk to-morrow morning over a yawning breakfast-table.

Father was standing in the far doorway, watching it all with the kindest of smiles. Half the guests seemed to forget *the host* in their warm adieux to the former owner of Stoke ; but, if my father knew that, he only noticed it by an amused smile.

It gladdened me to the heart to see his unselfishness, when a little dash of cold water seemed thrown on my mind by hearing Beau's voice say in low disgust behind me :

"Horribly bad taste I call it of Bee, bringing that fellow here to-night, as if to make the county look upon us as *parvenus*."

"I *wish* she had not, certainly, my dear," murmured mother's voice in answer. Upon looking round I found both behind me in a doorway; and mother's lips were slightly tight-pressed as if the scene was one of secret mortification to her, though father smiled so utterly free of guile or envy.

My mother beckoned me quietly to her side. "So you were with Mr. Bracy, dear; stay here now—the Duchess is just going away."

The Duchess and grand-aunt Bee were indeed engaged in making those farewells to their friends which mean, in each case, a ten minutes' postscript talk after the first good-bye; but at last they disengaged themselves. The great lady said now several amiable nothings to mother, who smiled her still answers, more stilly and sweetly than usual. Mrs. Gladman also came, and kissing me warmly, was to my surprise very affectionately greeted by my mother; as was John. Fulke Bracy received only her most frigid politeness, though I gave him a furtive look and hand-grasp that he answered in kind.

"God bless you all! for it has been a great success," uttered Bee devoutly in a loud whisper, stopping behind a moment, and adding: "But I think *my* man was the hero of the evening. Pleasance, child, I expect you to be in love with him."

My mother's brows contracted in dignified disapproval; Beau looked black.

"Well, if she isn't, I am," exclaimed Alice gaily in the background, "and he danced with me half the evening."

"Yes; I think he asked you rather too often. He was not afflicted with shyness, evidently," thickly observed Sir Dudley, still further in the rear.

"My good old man, why should he be?" laughed

Lady Digges. "Why, I told him there was nobody else I cared half as much to dance with!—could I have said more?"

"Well, no; I don't suppose so, though upon my soul I believe you are capable of anything," heavily returned her spouse.

"And I have invited him warmly to Broadhams this winter," ended her Ladyship triumphantly. Several of us looked at her in misgiving, but there was no lowering of a storm on Sir Dudley's brow. She was so pretty; and still ruled him, by that and her childish *entrain*, as entirely as in the days before marriage.

So all ended well; and not a departing guest but assured us again and again that it had been a most delightful ball. Our own feelings on the subject were mixed; but in general disposed to accept the soft flattery with self-gratification and to quench misgivings. It often is so with the givers of a feast.

CHAPTER XVII.

Our guests mostly all left us on the day after the ball; all the young men at least, since Beau would not—and Bob, poor fellow, could not—stay with us longer to entertain them. So Clair St. Leger said good-bye, and till nearly December I should see him no more.

Aunt Bee was reported to have still kept on the Gladmans and Mr. Bracy for a few days; but my mother gently put so many soft objections in the way of father's

proposal, which had been warmly seconded by Alice, that we should drive over to see them, that the plan dropped. The only one of us from Stoke who was determined to see its former owner, and sturdily carried his point, was old Joe Verity, our gardener. He walked over and back the full twenty miles' distance in his Sunday boots, and was footsore for two days afterwards. My mother gently chid him, for not having waited on the chance of finding some neighbour's spring-cart going that way; reminding him he was not so young or strong as he had been.

"Just so, ma'am," said the faithful old man. "I thought if I missed seeing Mr. Fulke now, I'd never see him younger;" and he shut up his mouth thereupon, with a reticent but self-satisfied expression.

At last the time came when Rose and I were to set off on our visit to Broadhams; for my father and mother only meant to spend a few days there, and then to bring us home with them.

During all the days since our ball, I only seemed to have been waiting and looking forward, almost *living forward!* It was a strange feeling, for hitherto I had always enjoyed my daily life more or less gladly; or at least, if any disagreeable days came, there was unfailing hope with the morrow. But now, nothing in this daily round seemed worth existing for. My whole soul was as if projected forward into the coming time. Days, even hours, seemed either wearily blank, or a heavy span to be perforce dragged through; my usual occupations burdensome, or a shadowy dream. But at last, as I said, we had packed up all our best dresses, and—speaking for myself—having hardly slept the night before, were off on our journey to one of the flattest and fattest of the midland shires.

"Of course Alice will come to meet us at the station," said Rose, with bright expectation, as we drew near our goal.

Alice, to her, was still "our eldest sister," whose pet she had especially been, rather than Lady Digges, the admired mistress of one of the greatest houses in the country.

"I hardly think she will," said I doubtfully.

"Why, Pleasance! how can you say so? Would not we go to meet *her*? You have got into a moping way of looking at things lately; what is the matter with you? Father remarked it the other day, though mother told him it was all nonsense—he thought you were not well."

The blood stirred within me at that; and I moved uneasily to look out of the window. Moping! I should be so ashamed to be thought moping after Clair; and oh! I had been trying so hard to be as pleasant and cheerful, to outward appearances, as ever.

At the station an enormous but empty family omnibus awaited us; no Alice. The Digges footmen were powdered, ours were not; the first slight sign of the difference in our respective households. On our drive I praiseworthyly forbore to observe on my superior prescience, as Rose half indignantly began inventing excuses for Alice. Between times she kept flattening her nose against the window, declaring the country the ugliest she had ever seen—dreary, straight roads with hedges like dead-wood walls hiding all prospect—save where an occasional gate showed a glimpse of great sodden pastures, or turnip-fields stretching to the dull gray horizon.

"I should *hate* to live here; shouldn't you?" she exclaimed. Then, after ten seconds: "Why, it is no

more to be compared even to the country round Stoke——”

“To Stoke! I should think not,” was my jealous interruption. “None of us need ever think, if we marry, to have such another home as Stoke.” I was disappointed, too, like Rose; but not on account of Alice. It had been a half-hope in my mind that some one else might have come down in the same train with us. When was Clair coming? or could he—not be coming?

He had written to me, that he would try to be at Broadhams at the same time as ourselves; for, it must be owned, we had exchanged one or two letters since we parted. Very few—pride, or shyness, or both, had prevented my writing oftener.

Presently, after being well wearied of the landscape, we drove through a great castellated archway, the gates opening mysteriously as of their own accord. No laughing children peeped past the solemnly drawn blinds of the lodges, on either side; not a flower, shrub, or creeper broke the dead monotony of their walls or the sweep of gray gravel.

Then came a long, damp drive, bordered by iron palings, through a wide, flat park that looked to us dull as desolation. Yet winter-time at Broadhams meant that then the great flat-roofed palace was at its best; itself full of guests, and the coverts of pheasants. In summer the park was hot and ugly, with its solemn standard trees dotted too far apart for any shade, but to a few fat deer that looked dull and respectable like all else here. The square great house seemed geometrically set down in the very midst of this park; and by some whim not a rhododendron clump, no shrub, nor flower, had been permitted to invade the dead green of the surrounding turf for a considerable distance.

From a quarter of a mile away on each side, one could see every figure that went in or out of the house. A broad gravel walk surrounded it, with such painful grayness, to my eye, that any weed would have been a relief; while dead-looking, greenish glass windows inserted here and there by the path's edge, made one sorry for the servants down in the dim-lit basement.

The house stables, as unsightly buildings, were discreetly hidden out of sight in a great mass of shrubbery a quarter of a mile away; and all menial communication with the house was carried on by means of an underground passage. As to the home farm, it was a good morning's walk distant. For all its cheerful animal sounds and sights had been presumably thought too entirely vulgar by the heavy Georgian mind of whatever Sir Dudley Digges had planned Broadhams to his liking.

As we drove up and were ushered into a Plutonian stone hall, meant only for cold and coats, gloves, hats, and such small gear, we looked forward expectantly; but no smiling Alice appeared among her many tall, properly proportioned and powdered servants. In a vast inner marble hall warmed by four fires, and surrounded by statues, above which ran a round gallery, we looked around once more — as the chief of these splendid domestics paused.

"Her Ladyship is out driving in her pony-carriage, with Mr. Bracy," he suavely explained, as if sorry for our evident and indeed murmured disappointment; then respectfully inquired, would we prefer to be shown at once to our rooms, or to go into the morning-room. He believed Mrs. Jessop was there.

"Mrs. Jessop, who is she?" muttered Rose to me half crossly, being tired and cold.

"The widowed Mrs. Jessop—her Ladyship's friend," blandly reiterated our obsequious vice-host, evidently pitying our profound social ignorance; "and I believe Mr. St. Leger is in the morning-room also."

"Let us go upstairs first and take off our wraps," declared Rose at that, not caring a fig whether she saw Clair St. Leger an hour hence, or not. But I, trying to steady my voice from any undue hurry, interposed:

"We can go upstairs very soon, dear, when our luggage has been taken up, you know; but we may as well just get warm in the morning room first."

So it was done; for when I rarely *did* decide on anything, my own way was curiously always given me. We went down a wide, carpeted and sofa-lined corridor, warmed to a hothouse temperature with hot air—one leaf of double mahogany doors, lofty enough for giants, was noiselessly opened. We passed round a heavy Chinese screen, placed to exclude all possible but improbable draughts in such a hermetically tight-closed, snugly kept, British household. A square, heavily-furnished room opened before us, giving an impression, before my senses could rightly discern separate objects, of long-established dull wealth. . . .

But all I knew was, and not even this clearly—that, just out of the direct heat of an enormous fire, sat a high-complexioned, black-haired woman in a deep arm-chair. And on the fender-stool exactly at her feet, basking enjoyably in the fire-glow—and it seemed likewise in the glances of her bright black eyes, from the way his own blue ones seemed looking up in them—his handsome head almost on a level with her knees, sat Clair St. Leger, my lover.

We had come in so softly on the three-piled carpet, they had not heard us.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ROSE and I did not stay long downstairs. We were now in our two vast bedrooms, opening one out of the other for companionship's sake, presumably; nevertheless, as Rose called from far away out of the cavernous depths of her state apartment, it required a day's march for us to visit each other. It was a chilly walk, certainly, between the fireplace and the dressing-table at one distant window, and the wash-stand at the other. Clearly, the advantages Alice enjoyed as mistress of Broadhams were not as yet appreciated by my younger sister.

I hardly knew, however, what Rose was saying. I had heavily taken off my wraps and bonnet, and let them fall rather than put them on the huge bed, like unto that of Ware. Then I came over to the fire, walking in a dream. There, leaning on the mantelpiece with my head bowed on my hands, I stood lost in heavy thought. *What* was wrong? *Was* anything wrong?

Thus Rose found me—as she came in after singing cheerily to herself in her own room, as blithely but as unmusically, to own the truth, as a sparrow's chirp; whilst pretending to help our maid to unpack, but in reality being helped by the latter every three seconds in the easy task of tidying her appearance before five o'clock tea-time.

"What! not ready yet! why, how you have been dawdling!" she exclaimed with sisterly honesty. "Your hair is all rough, and you look as if the journey had made you ill. A nice sight you'll be to come downstairs. My *dear* Pleasance!—let me help you."

And this barely eighteen-year-old Rose flew to set

me to rights, with the protecting air of a wisely superior caretaker.

"No—? Do I look hideous?" I asked nervously, hastening to study the glass; a movement which made Rose, who was pinning some lace down at the back of my neck, follow me in a run, inflicting small stabs and apologising all the way. My face was certainly almost colourless—except for my lips, that from nervous pressing together and perhaps having been unconsciously bitten, were blood-red; while my eyes looked drearily brown without a spark of light in them, and were larger than usual, with rings darkly defined underneath.

"Well, you certainly have not got as fine a complexion as Mrs. Jessop downstairs. Don't stand too near her, or she'll put you in the shade," laughed my easy little sister, not knowing she was giving a worse dagger-thrust to my heart than those of the pin to my body, adding: "How nice and friendly she seemed, from the way she shook hands with us!"

"Oh, very—and offered to get us lunch and everything, as if we could not ask for what we wanted in our own sister's house. She seemed certainly to consider us the strangers, and to be quite at home herself," I replied, with unconscious bitterness.

Rose looked up in utter surprise.

"Why, you must be ill, Pleasance. I never knew you speak like that before."

At this moment Alice burst into the room. "Oh, my dears, I'm frozen alive with the cold!" was her first greeting, uttered with a radiant face and preoccupied air, showing she had enjoyed her drive. "So you've come!—I'm so glad"—lightly embracing us both. "But now, come to *my* rooms. I haven't a moment to spare before putting on my new tea-gown, and as Lady

Pawlett always wears smart ones I want to cut her out to-night. Pleasance not ready, do you say, Rose? Oh, nonsense, she'll do well enough, and she never minds—do you, dear? Come—come!"

Away she swept us to her suite of rooms; rapidly explaining on the way that these had been settled according to her own taste—the rest of the house being *too* hideous! But Sir Dudley was still obstinate about changes there. "However, in time, my dears, we'll see—in time! Oh, I mean to have my own way." Her rooms indeed were charming. A Watteau-like nutshell of a boudoir all hung in ruby watered silk, with exquisite china crowded everywhere; fairy-like furniture; all kinds of most cunning and newest knick-knacks. We cried out in admiration, and would have stayed to examine it more closely, but Alice hurried us on to her dressing-room. This in its own way was equally delightful, with crystal and marble shrines fit for Venus rising from the Paphian waves; while the magnificent silver-mirrored and ivory inlaid dressing-table was covered with such treasures as Belinda's attendant sprites would have joyed to guard.

"That is a new gown—not one of your trousseau ones," uttered Rose, examining with sharp eyes the exquisite garment which Alice's maid was rapidly preparing to put on her.

"Yes, I had to get a whole new set in Paris; those mother would choose me looked so plain," laughed Alice. "Half my next year's allowance is gone beforehand already. No matter; I'll just have to coax my old man for more. Well—and how do you like Jenny Jessop, my great friend? I met her for the first time a month ago, when we were visiting in Hampshire, and she certainly *is* the best company in the world."

"Has she been long a widow? Is she—well off?" I slowly asked, not quite owning to myself why I put those questions.

"Long? No! she got out of weeds as soon as decency permitted; and you may be very sure she will bear her single affliction not a minute longer than she can well help it." So saying lightly—and ignoring the latter part of my sentence, which I had not courage to repeat—Lady Digges hurried us downstairs. On the way she enumerated the names of her guests, of whom it seemed a large party had just come in after having gone, to please Sir Dudley, for a dull, cold drive on his coach. But I knew none of them, excepting the Pawletts and Mr. Bracy. As to the latter, I said in a heavy, surprised way: "I am quite astonished that you really have asked him here. Of course, you told us all how much you liked him at our ball; but still you only knew him that one night, so——"

"Just so, my dear," nodded my sister with an arch smile, and pausing with her hand on the drawing-room door-handle to half whisper to us: "Poor old Dudley absolutely was foolish enough to grumble at my having danced so much with Mr. Bracy at Stoke. So as I intend to nip all such little jealousies in the bud, I never rested till I got him here. Heavens and earth! but it was a trouble; it cost me more letters to bring that man than nearly all the rest put together."

Knowing Alice's weakness for exaggeration in such small matters, I took this last statement for what it might be worth; and as she rustled with charming grace to join her assembled friends, I followed quietly, feeling like a blot on her brightness—though Rose behind our dear fashionable beauty looked a fresh country rose-bud.

We found ourselves in a different room. A narrow drawing-room heavily draped in gorgeous yellow, its great length broken by pillars and separate fireplaces, its walls almost covered with full-length Digges portraits. Being rather superstitious in small things, I was grateful for the change of scene from the morning-room ; as if therewith might come a change of circumstances for myself. It proved so indeed.

There was a large, laughing group at the far fireplace as we entered, among whom was Clair ; also Mrs. Jessop. She, like Alice and several others, had changed her dress for a violet and gold tea-gown ; which might have seemed loud, if she had not volubly assured every one it was half-mourning. Mr. Bracy was the first to recognise and shake hands with me, but he was immediately called away by Alice.

After I had been shyly but warmly greeted by poor Amy Pawlett, and received a brusque hand-clasp from Charlotte, they were also both immediately wanted by Alice to do the honours of the tea-table, which she herself found too much trouble.

"Now that your sisters are here, won't you give them that post of honour, my dear ?" whispered Mrs. Jessop audibly, for my benefit, with what she meant to be a very conciliatory glance at myself.

"Oh dear, no ! my sisters will want to amuse themselves as well as the rest of us, and Lady Pawlett likes those two girls to be made useful," was the merry reply.

Amuse ourselves ! Yes, every one else seemed to be doing that around me. Not one but myself seemed to have the least shadow of secret care on their hearts. With the tinkling of tea-cups mingled eager chat ; and the rippling of laughter came as continuously as that of little waves on a beach. The very atmosphere seemed

to convey the *aura* of their careless mirth from their minds to mine. But I, feeling myself—just poor Pleasance Brown—plain and disregarded once more, sat withdrawn somewhat in shadow, my eyes only trying to watch unobserved one figure there, being too strained and anxious to *amuse* myself.

At last Clair looked round searchingly and came straight towards me ; though with his usual air of gay carelessness.

“Why are you hiding yourself here?” he asked, scanning me with blue, wide-opened eyes, and a merry smile ; whilst all my own imperfections of pallor and careless attire seemed to myself surely frightfully evident.

“I am a little tired, and had rather a headache after our journey,” was my answer, almost apologetic in its lowness ; and yet an apology was surely not necessary on *my* side.

“Yes ; I thought by the very first glance I had, that you did not seem quite yourself on arriving this afternoon,” and so saying Clair sat down and played with an Indian puzzle that lay on the table between us. His tone was now peculiar, forced, and might mean reproach, that I had already misjudged him in haste—(for indeed the situation in which I had found him was mayhap harmless enough !)—or it perhaps signified embarrassment. I only replied, however :

“Can you be much surprised at that?”

At this moment, Fulke Bracy came up to me with tea. “I saw you had been forgotten, and you must need some refreshment,” he said. Clair exclaimed at his own remissness in not thinking of my wants. Then the short interruption over, as Bracy left us, he quickly bent his head and murmured : “Don’t you think after this, that you might very well be supposed to be taking

some rest upstairs after your journey? Do you know the round gallery over the hall? No?—Well, if you don't mind waiting . . . That won't please you, however; you would rather be waited for, I know, so you will find me presently at the head of the staircase, and I will show you the gallery. . . . Don't keep me too long, before you come; that's all."

He was gone from my side before I could make any inquiry or answer, and had sauntered out of the room with a most un-preoccupied air. What did he mean? Tired, troubled, I felt anxious and half-ashamed at the idea of a clandestine meeting; and that too so hurriedly after our arrival. Why could not Clair have stayed here beside me on the sofa, and said all he wished—and that I should be so glad to hear—quite unheard, and most likely unheeded, by the others in this large room?

But his will was too much my law; the temptation too strong. So I found myself going alone, presently, up the great, dimly-lit stairs, though with slow, dignified steps that sank inaudibly into the thickness of the carpet. On reaching the head of the staircase, not a soul was to be seen; and perfect silence reigned through the long, picture-hung corridors before me.

CHAPTER XIX.

HALF indignant, yet almost relieved, I stood to give one hurried, searching glance along the warmly-red perspective of the broad passage; to see that no figure could be inspecting one of the many cases of stuffed birds, butter-

flies, beetles, and what Rose called "stones," that were placed museum-like down its length. No one!

Why, I hardly knew—but, with a sudden impulse, I darted like a loosed arrow towards the heavy baize doors that led to the sacred precincts of the young ladies' wing—the rooms on either side of this great corridor I was in, being given to the chiefest and married guests. But before I had vanished away to the safety of my own room, a detaining hand was lightly laid on my shoulder, and a laughing voice said in my ear:

"Why such haste, fair and faithless female? The round gallery is not *there*!"

"Where were you? I did not see you," was my almost unwilling reply.

Clair pointed with a smile to the curtains of a near window in the recess, behind which he must have been concealed.

"It was worth hiding to see your 'fair face blushing with sweet surprise' at my supposed rudeness. What a hurry you were in to display your dignity! This way, and—please don't run away again."

Pushing a swing-door that opened noiselessly, we entered a round, shadowy gallery, looking down on the softly-lit marble hall; the coloured glass dome of which was over our heads. Three other doors led to different quarters of the house. Yet, as Clair explained in a quick whisper, being surrounded by corridors, the gallery was not very often used as a passage-way; although being considered a lounge in the heart of the house, our presence there was not remarkable.

Cushioned niches offered seats perfectly hidden, in the dim light up here, from any one crossing the hall below. But with us, any person was easily reconnoitred if coming from the drawing-rooms, billiard-room, or any

of the reception-rooms below, since they must needs cross this central hall, on which even the tapping of the lightest woman's heel made sonorous echoes.

Now that we were alone together, Clair's outbursts of devotion on seeing me again were enough to allay all my fears on first entering the house. There was no doubt now in my mind of his fondness for me—none! Yet I was still ill at ease and nervous. What was the matter with me? St. Leger asked twice with reproachful gaiety; for he certainly had to guess at rather than elicit the answering words of gladness that stood mute on my lips. Ah! could he not guess how differently we seemed to have passed the intervening time since our last meeting at Stoke?—I in anxiety and waiting, that now made me as timid and fearful as he was light-hearted and thoughtless of the future.

A few brief minutes had barely passed away when the feeling of shame lest any one should surprise us, which had been on me from the first, so grew that, suddenly making a movement to rise, I said: "I must go now—I told Alice I was going to my own room."

"What! So soon! when I have hardly seen you. Nonsense; it is not to be permitted," and he caught me by both hands laughingly, for he was sitting beside me in the recess, exclaiming: "There. I dare you to go now."

"But please! *please!* indeed I would rather go. What would any one say if——?"

At that instant footsteps were distinctly audible crossing the hall below. At once I started up, but as quickly sat down again; remembering I was otherwise likely to be seen; almost trembling with new fright. Oh, if Clair did but understand that this secrecy, if sweet to him, was equally painful to me! And if he only wished so, there need be no necessity for it.

"Why are you afraid? It is only Bracy," whispered Clair, peering cautiously down. "He is an awfully good fellow; isn't he? 'If he comes here,' do you say? Oh, no; I've never known him cross this gallery before. What a capital meeting-place it is, to be sure! I defy our natural enemies, chaperons, to discover whoever has got first into this watch-tower."

"You seem to know it very well!"

How the quick jealousy leapt out, I do not know—after my thinking it was all buried, too—but something familiar in his tone may have jarred on my almost overstrung, sensitive nerves. Without reason, or logic, women sometimes seem to possess a gift of divining the truth. My chance shaft must have struck home; for Clair looked up, then at once dropped his gaze, with a slightly nettled, colder air.

"Why—what?—what do you mean, Pleasance? This is the second time this afternoon you have made me fancy you were displeased at something. I cannot imagine what."

Before I could answer—though indeed in my trouble it was unlikely that any clear answer could have come—one of the four swing-doors opened. And as my prophetic soul had too truly foretold, Fulke Bracy came into the gallery.

"Hallo!—what brings him?" muttered Clair in a disgusted undertone, rising at once. I had sprung to my feet on the first opening of the door, and now assumed a careless attitude leaning on the rail. For a moment Mr. Bracy appeared not to have perceived us, and to be passing on the other side; but then, retracing his steps, he came and said pleasantly, but I fancied significantly:

"Oh, St. Leger, I believe the ladies downstairs are

sending messages round the house for you. They have started the idea of having a paper-chase (of all things in the world!) through the passages, and want you to be the hare. Will you come?"

"Will I?—of course! Is this the latest brilliant thought of the fair Jessop?" answered Clair at once, with an alacrity which—though I knew how really disgusted he had been a minute ago at the interruption—none the less startled me by its apparent sincerity. I was unused yet to such little deceptions; and never did get used to them, for the matter of that.

A door below now opened, letting forth a flood of feminine voices, laughter, and the rustling of skirts. As the sound came nearer beneath the gallery, I looked hastily round for some means of escape.

"You don't want to join them, perhaps?" said Bracy quickly, who had been watching me. "You are tired after travelling; I thought you would be so. This way, then, before you are seized on. This door leads you directly into the young ladies' gallery."

So saying, he showed me an opposite door to that by which we had entered, whilst Clair rather slowly turned away. And as I sped into the safety of our own passage with a sense of some thankfulness, if of confusion, it was Fulke Bracy who quickly closed the door again behind my flying footsteps, ably covering my retreat.

CHAPTER XX.

THE fun was fast and furious at Broadhams that evening.

Most of the guests had only preceded us by a day or two, but had already worn off any first stiffness, or doubt as to what manners or customs might best please the reigning spirit in the house. Besides, several of them—of whom were Mrs. Jessop and Clair St. Leger—had already met Alice at other houses in the winter. Then jokes had been made that were now perpetuated into secret passwords, a shibboleth to the uninitiated like myself, and fun had begun in the germ that was to grow to its utmost riot at Broadhams.

Rose came upstairs, astonished and glowing with her account of the mad paper-chase. The trail had been carried, to the housekeeper's desperation, through all the stately-kept passages, excepting those near Sir Dudley's study; till finally Clair St. Leger had been run to earth in a bath-room, from which it was impossible to dislodge him, he had so fortified himself behind an army of water-jugs, which he threatened to discharge at his assailants.

"But—I must tell you, Pleasance dear! I do hope your headache is better, for Alice is quite vexed with you for not coming too. She whispered to me that she hoped you were not going to play the prude, as it was quite enough to have the Pawlett girls looking prim. Oh, and you are not to let Sir Dudley know by any chance! Fancy, Lady Pawlett was first and foremost in the fun with us all!"

Acting on Rose's hint, I tried to put away all traces of heaviness of spirit; as also, to make a better impression, I dressed myself in one of my prettiest gowns.

Downstairs came my reward, for as I looked round at all the other ladies, especially at Mrs. Jessop, who was beautifully dressed in black and yellow, thinking they must surely outshine me, Amy Pawlett came up and said bluntly :

"How nice you look, Pleasance !"

"What a surprising fact !" observed St. Leger sarcastically ; and, "Is that anything so very unusual, Miss Pawlett ?" said Mr. Bracy, both at the same moment, as they were standing by. But then with a pleasant smile of making way, Bracy, who was at my side, moved away ; and Clair at once took advantage of the opportunity to say in a hurried undertone :

"Do you know that all the ladies are to choose who is to take them in to dinner to-night ? Look—they are all telling Lady Digges now." There was indeed a laughing group surrounding Alice, round which again stood a black outer wall of manhood, waiting to be chosen with a more or less of "don't-care-if-I'm-not" air of bravery, and smiles. "I don't know, of course, whether you want any one else ; but if not you might as well ask for me," continued Clair, just raising his eyes in pleading sweetness.

"Go and ask for you before them all ? . . . It is a dreadful idea !" I answered, hesitating.

"Quick ; or it will be too late ; and I want to have you to myself this first evening. All the rest can do it, so why not—ah ! there——"

At that moment, Mrs. Jessop, detaching herself from the group, made a little triumphant signal to Clair, her black eyes dancing and a smile of merry conquest on her lips. She was no doubt much older than himself ; but still she looked a comely woman, this rival of mine—as my heart misgave me she was.

"You are my property, so don't try to run away," she exclaimed.

"Who would do so, even if they could, Mrs. Jessop?" replied St. Leger, with a bow and smile that *I* should have thought mocking; but she seemed fully satisfied. And now, to my surprise, a broad, rather round-shouldered figure came towards me from a group of gentlemen with a slightly rolling gait, and John Gladman, for it was he, said, smiling broadly:

"How d'ye do, Miss Pleasance? I say, haven't you chosen anybody yet at this game? No; well, I'm awfully glad, for you might give an old friend a chance. Nobody else will have me, I don't think."

"You don't recommend yourself very well," I answered, smiling, but sadly; as Clair, with vexation in his heart against my slackness, moved slowly towards his widow.

"Oh, I don't say but that some of them might have me; the Pawletts, for instance; but they're not of much account," went on the young man confidentially. "And there is a jolly-looking little sister of yours, too, though I hardly know her."

"Rose: would you like to ask her?" I answered in a state of absence of mind, turning my neck, which was luckily as flexible as it was long, to see if Mr. Bracy, who was standing still aside, behind me, was unclaimed. For John Gladman was well enough; but my old friend was better.

But John was not to be treated thus, and moving steadily round in front of me, explained with a sort of good-humoured exasperation at my supposed stupidity:

"Don't you understand what I tell you, that *I* can't choose a lady to-night! And if even I could, it would be you, not your sister. It was you my mother told me

I was to be sure and ask to dance always, and——” The sentence ended in a sound of confusion, but picking himself up gallantly John went on: “You know she’s so awfully fond of you, she’d like me to do you any little good turn I could, you know.”

“Dear, good Mrs. Gladman! how sweet of her to have remembered me all this time.” And, so saying, I lifted my eyes unconsciously to John’s face, whilst they were alight with a gleam of gratitude and love meant altogether for her—not for him.

“Well, yes; she is a dear good soul, isn’t she? There are not many women in this world like my mother! . . . And as you’ve always been a favourite of hers, she’d like you and me to be great chums. Don’t you see——?”

“Of course!—Yes,” I said, somewhat confused. For at that moment Alice bore gaily down upon us, while at the same time Mr. Bracy approached me too. If still a wandering knight, that distressed damsel *me* would so gladly choose him as my gallant, instead of this poor John.

“Now, Pleasance! Pleasance! you deserve a shaking for not coming like the rest of us to choose your cavalier,” cried my sister. “So, as there is only Hobson’s choice left, you had better make *it* with a good grace.”

“But I shall be very glad indeed if I may have——” I murmured, forgetting what the famous choice meant between the horse you could hire and—none other! Thereupon my shy glance met Fulke Bracy’s kindly eyes, that answered mine with friendly light.

“You can’t have Mr. Bracy, if you mean that,” interposed Alice. “For, as this is one of the few occasions on which the lady of the house can be taken in by you, sir—I claim you for my own self.” Turning to confront him, she dropped an arch little curtsey. He

bowed gravely. I blushed crimson at my stupid mistake. But John Gladman came to my rescue, honestly unaware that he had been recently snubbed.

"Why, you're all astray, Lady Digges! It was *me*, not Bracy, Miss Pleasance was going to ask; for we had just settled it together."

"Oh, well; that is all right then," answered Alice with careless grace. So we all filed in to dinner.

During the interminable dinner-hours we now spent in eating and drinking, or rather on my part refusing course after course of fine new dishes, and old wines, my ears and outward attention seemed lent to John. In reality, my inner self was given up to Clair; pleading, reasoning against his anger with my shyness, till at last my mind quite exhausted itself with the double effort. My eyes, too, uselessly turned away from the honest, smug face on my left, to look down the long table to the right.

It was impossible to see Clair, for he sat on our side. But still it required a constant effort to keep gaze and thoughts from straying.

After a while I found John explaining volubly, in answer to my almost mindless queries, how it was he had been asked to Broadhams. It seemed Fulke Bracy had before promised to spend this very time at Wheatfield; so declined Lady Digges's hospitality. Then—having pressed for his reasons—she had conclusively gained her object by sending a flattering invitation, likewise, to young Gladman, as the son of her father's old friend.

"So I scored there, I rather think," ended good John, with a satisfied air. "But I say, aren't you eating anything? what a shame! Why, Sir Dudley pays £300 a year to his cook."

Catching his own name, my brother-in-law, close to whom we were sitting, looked up.

John Gladman, with a genial air of certitude that he was making himself pleasant, bent forward to explain.

"I was just saying, Sir Dudley, that I *do* go in for a regular feed at your dinners. It's really worth while being hungry for them! And after our drive to-day I went off for a sharp walk round the park by myself, till it was pitch dark, and came in with a glorious appetite."

"Bless my heart," returned Sir Dudley in his thick, slow voice, with that magnificent disregard of politeness one notices sometimes in rich men. "One would think you were talking of gorging on bacon and beans."

"But why, Sir Dudley? Aren't you generally hungry yourself?" returned the abashed John, staring with significantly round eyes at his host's plate piled with *crème de volaille*, succeeding mountains of previous succulent dishes like Pelion on Ossa. Verily it was no wonder he asked.

"Never!" quoth my brother-in-law, quoting Punch, with a self-glorifying smile at his own happy memory. "I'm never hungry, but thank God, I'm greedy! Hullo! what's that—*did you say no!* to that dish?" And to the consternation of the Pawlett girls who were nearest him, his little eyes, that, set in his heavy head, gave him some resemblance to a hippopotamus, transfixed Rose, who sat opposite us, with displeased astonishment.

"I did," said Rose bravely. "I'll have some plain meat by-and-by, thank you; I don't care for *entrées*."

"Plain meat!—don't care!" ejaculated the chief ally of our family in pious horror; then solemnly to the servants, whose circling progress he had arrested as suddenly as if they represented the sun, and he Joshua in the valley of Ajalon: "Bring back that dish to Miss

Rose Brown." (By this time the eyes of half the table were upon the luckless, freshly-come-out damsel who dared to beard the greatest gourmet of five counties round, as to what she should choose to eat in his house!) "How often have you been at a large dinner since you left your schoolroom?" he next inquired impressively.

"Hardly at all, I am happy to say; for I like tea and bread-and-jam best," saucily responded Rose, trying some of the unknown food on the tip of her fork with an air of extreme suspicion.

"Lord help you, child, your education is hardly begun; you don't know *what to eat!* Thank goodness you were sent to my house. From henceforth you must sit every night beside me, and I'll teach you."

"We'll see about that," nodded Rose, with a mutinous little smile.

The intense pity with which I regarded our unfortunate youngest one can hardly be described; whilst John Gladman eyed her with no less of astonished admiration.

"Well, I say, she has pluck! I'd no more think of cheeking Sir Dudley like that than—than——" Failing in any comparison, he applied himself to his dinner; if with less outward sign of enjoyment, yet still with considerable suppressed satisfaction.

As we ladies left the dinner-table, Alice archly gave orders in a low tone to several of the younger gentlemen near her, not to remain too long in the dining-room.

Accordingly they promptly followed, leaving Sir Dudley, Lord Pawlett, and a few of the old school over their wine.

"And now, let us all go to the billiard-room, and have a gamble," cried Alice, Mrs. Jessop, and Lady Pawlett, who seemed the leading spirits. Or rather her

Ladyship encouraged them all with effusive good-humour and gaiety, anxious not to let herself be left behind in the race by the younger generation. Yet she was cautiously discreet; so that if visiting later any Puritan household she might be able to hold up her hands a little over the Broadhams doings, insinuating she had only gone with the tide.

"Good-night, Pleasance and Rose. I am going to bed: and if you take my advice you will both go too," grimly said Charlotte Pawlett to us aside; adding with a deep sigh: "Amy, I am sorry to say, is too fond of the opinion of the world to do as I do. She has ceased to be united with me in all things (as we once were, heart and soul)."

"It is you who have changed and gone to such extremes," returned poor Amy in a like undertone, nearly crying.

"But if I can save (or perhaps I ought to say warn) you young girls from being drawn into the—the—the evil habits here (as I feel they are), it is only doing my duty," ended Charlotte. Her sentences sounded oddly mixed to us; all the main portion being solemnly delivered, whilst her many parentheses were weak and weepy.

"All this about going to bed! Not I, thank you; why the fun of the evening is just beginning," quoth Rose decidedly, while I asked, more far-seeing:

"Why! what do they do in the billiard-room that is so very dreadful?"

"They smoke"—Amy hesitated, with a frightened look at her sister.

"Smoke!—you ought to be truthful, instead of uttering such a miserable equivocation!" Charlotte darted in, with a withering glance; then turning her back on us all, stalked from the room.

"Really, though Charlotte is so good herself, I wish she would not always accuse everybody else of telling lies," Amy complained to us, looking miserable. "I *was* just going to tell you both that, besides, they always play for money."

"Come on ; come on, won't you two join us ? I know you will !" cried Mrs. Jessop at the moment with merry patronage, and an enticing smile to us both as she passed, adding in very audible tones of warm flattery to Alice : "What dear girls your sisters look ; so nice and fresh about everything ; just what I love." In the billiard-room, to our surprise, the innocent-looking cover of a table was removed, and a green roulette-cloth shown beneath it.

"Now then — ladies and gentlemen, make your game ! make your game !" cried Clair St. Leger, installing himself as banker at the head of the table and giving a preliminary spin or two to the roulette with a lively rattle. "Put on your stakes ! Red and even has it this time—come, pile on the money !"

"I mean to break the bank ; I dreamt last night what number would win ; just that of my own age," cried Mrs. Jessop, placing herself beside St. Leger by a decided movement, and gaily putting five sovereigns on 28.

There was an outcry all round, of mixed dissuasion and applause, which I did not understand.

"I'll stand by you, Jenny," cried my sister Alice, and she put two half-sovereigns *à cheval* beside the supposed lucky number. In a trice the table was covered with notes and gold.

"You are not going to play, *are* you ? it will be high to-night," said Mr. Bracy in an undertone in my ear, making me start ; for standing shyly aloof, looking in a

half-dream at Clair and the Jessop widow, I did not know who was beside me.

"Shall I not? . . . I don't know, quite; not of course that I care to play high, you know" (confidentially), "but as every one else is doing so——"

The truth was, my heart hankered to stand on Clair's other side.

"You will find that every one will not be playing. Some of the quieter spirits are sure to have a game of billiards, which you could easily join." Then seeing I hesitated still, he added: "Not that I meant for a moment to force my advice upon you; even though you gave me the privilege of considering myself an old friend."

"No; but please do advise me, Mr. Bracy! I should be really glad; for you understand roulette, and I know nothing——"

"Pleasance, Pleasance! are you coming to play? Come—put on your money, quick!" cried Alice.

"Say you want to play billiards," urged Bracy in a hasty whisper; so acting on what I guessed to be a warning, I thus answered. On which Alice shrugged her shoulders with a dissatisfied air.

"You see how much they are putting on," went on Fulke Bracy, explaining the nature of the stakes to my comprehension.

"What! Mr. St. Leger might lose all that!" I exclaimed, horror-stricken; then, to cover my involuntary betrayal, added with somewhat bitter playfulness: "And so twenty-eight is Mrs. Jessop's age?"

"She says so, and she 'ought to know!'—how one may be deceived, for I should have imagined over forty to be nearer the mark," smiled Bracy. But, at that moment, Clair spun the roulette, and my foolish heart

quite leapt with anxiety for him to win. Rattle ! rattle ! rattle ! round flew the ball, leaping, spinning ; it settled, but the colours still swam and shivered before my straining eyes ; slower and slower the board revolved, slackened—stopped—at number 28 !

There was such a burst of exclamations at the surprising coincidence that they quite deafened me. I could hardly get a glimpse of Clair's face, as all crowded round him to assure their eyes of the number having been veritably hit. Then as I stood behind the rest, heart-sorry at the result of this my first spectacle of drawing-room play, Sir Dudley put a heavy hand on my shoulder.

"Come to the billiard-table, and don't stand watching those fools. 'Pon my honour, 'pon my honour ! never saw such a thing in my life. All chance—but now the women will go staring mad trying to dream their numbers. Humph ! St. Leger must be rather sharply hit."

Now I could see poor Clair, and for all that he was trying to smile all round, and laugh gaily whilst pencilling I O U's to almost everybody. It was forced, so sympathy told me, and I took up my cue with a heavy heart.

Feeling in a dream, I played very badly, as Sir Dudley did not fail loudly and repeatedly to exclaim, vastly relishing his own bluntness. I must have been lost to proper consciousness of all round, indeed, that it never struck me where Rose might be ; though at any other time I would at once have given Bracy's warning (for as such it seemed meant) to our youngest—who in all serious matters regarded my behests more than what Alice might say, although calling me "a dear old goose."

Conscience gave me a sharp rap when, after nearly

an hour, up came Rose to our staid group. We were watching Sir Dudley stretching his ponderous body over the table, and puffing at an enormous cigar, whilst making a few cannons with great deliberation and tremendous difficulty. "You have surely not been playing?" I exclaimed aghast; suddenly waking up to the fact that her bright little face was pursed up in a peculiar way

"I have, though. Alice and Mrs. Jessop dragged me over, and lent me some money."

"Well; and what happened? Did you lose? Egad! little monkey, I *hope* you lost," put in our big brother-in-law, listening.

"I got," said Rose slowly, with a quaint little twinkle of ashamed fun, "just ten shillings' worth—of experience."

Then, as Sir Dudley, who had especially made her his favourite, and showed it by teasing, expanded his chest and laughed boisterously, she proceeded:

"I'm not one bit sorry I played, all the same, for I wanted to know what it was like—so, now I know. John Gladman wanted me to play just as he did; he's got some cautious way of sticking on the dozens, and says he never loses and often wins—but Mrs. Jessop said it wasn't sporting, and pulled my money off; so I lost."

"Well, you've learnt something to-night, anyhow," pursued Sir Dudley.

"Yes," said Rose impudently; "how bad tobacco smoke is, when you are all smoking like furnaces. If you are not choked, Pleasance, *I am!*" Certainly I had been feeling the thick atmosphere rather stifling, not knowing what oppressed me so unusually; for it requires custom to like a blinding tobacco parliament.

"Had you not better go to bed, dear?" I said, in a slow, weary way, feeling disappointed and dissatisfied. "I'll go with you, too; that is, if Sir Dudley will not mind."

"No, no, children; go if you like," answered he gruffly, but kindly, with a sort of regretful quiet; adding: "In former days, my old mother never would have allowed this sort of thing either, just like yours" (he forgot his age), "but now Alice likes it, you see—and so——"

We both retired, seeing it perplexed him to finish his sentence. As we skirted the gaming-table, my eagerly watchful eyes saw that Clair, having relinquished the banker's post, was now staking like the rest with a subdued air; so intent on the game he did not even *see* me.

"What's the matter, dears? why are you slipping away?" asked Alice, affectionately enough, disengaging herself from the rest. She remembered it was our first visit from home—and supposed us shy.

"The smoke gives us a headache. Don't be vexed, but we're not quite used to it, *you* know!" I replied for her hearing only. Rather to my surprise she answered kindly:

"Yes, and you look tired too, poor Pleasance; there are black circles under your eyes. Well, you had better not sit up; for when Lady Pawlett and Dudley and these other old fogies go off for their beauty sleep, Jenny Jessop is sure to have her cigarette and a few more—so your heads would be worse. I've not seen much of you yet; but still I'm so glad you've come."

"Let me get you some seltzer or soda-water," offered Bracy with quiet attention, following us to the door, where was a side-table with all sorts of strong and weaker waters, to quench thirst.

"*You played yourself after all!*" I said, looking rather reproachfully up at him. There was no clear logic in my mind; but still it seemed to me he ought not to have done so, and helped to fleece poor Clair (in a way) after warning *me*.

"That is quite a different matter. I am an old man—and steady—compared with you," he smiled, with a rather protecting, fatherly manner.

"Has—has Mr. St. Leger lost very much?" I ventured to add, dreadfully afraid lest I should blush, seizing the opportunity whilst Rose was thirstily drinking lemonade like a school-girl. My old friend just glanced at my face, and no more; then as quickly looked down.

"I believe he has got back a little of what they won from him; and probably before the night is over luck may turn still more in his favour."

Upon that I went away, stealing one lingering look unseen at the roulette-table.

CHAPTER XXI.

"SORROW may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning!" It may be so; and often gratefully we do so feel it! But how often again we merely rise bodily refreshed by the night's rest; and so a little stronger, but no more hopeful, buckle on each our pack of daily worries and troubles till nightfall comes once more.

Thus I thought, on rising the next morning at

Broadhams—and for several following mornings. Never had I imagined myself such stuff as heroines are made of; but only a poor human being, who must not expect the sun to be always shining bright over her head, when others around have rain often enough, heaven knows!

If Clair neglected me, it was not my nature to take it lightly as Alice might. Nor had I beauty enough to attract other men immediately, as she would, in revenge or consolation. Neither could I accept my fate in a practical, sensible way, like even our little Rose; who perhaps had more common sense than all the rest of us put together.

No; feeling myself only a goose in the family, for a little time admired by one man, and too proud of his liking maybe then, I now became again humbler and conscious of my own small worth; not having it in my heart to be angry, but only hoping that at times I might be able to creep out of sight if suffering very much—for it would have been dreadful if other people had guessed it.

The pheasant-shooting was in full swing at Broadhams now, and at several neighbouring great houses. At least, these were all about eight or ten miles away, for everything seemed on a large and distant scale in this shire. Therefore at home, the gentlemen went straight out soon after breakfast in all their war-paint; their minds rightly full only of guns, dogs, or perhaps tipping the keeper as to getting the best posts; and it seemed to me natural and proper enough that what they had to do they should do with all their heart. For, talk as some will, men are essentially different in minds from women—and cannot go brooding in this work-a-day world, but will even toil at play instead.

At lunch only, in the woods, we saw them these days,

in some of the picturesque keepers' lodges. There, in the small best parlours, hampers of good eatables and drinkables would be unpacked, leaving hardly room for us all to crush in and feed with our elbows in each other's plates. Even this concession Sir Dudley did *not* at all like. It was an innovation on the old immemorial customs of Broadhams, which only devotion to Alice could have induced him to make.

Once indeed Mrs. Jessop proposed, under cover of Alice's suggestion, that some of the ladies might also go out shooting; she herself being very proficient with a light gun. On this, Sir Dudley lost his temper, and was so rough that Alice—who could not have hit a haystack herself at thirty paces—fled, holding her hands over her pretty ears.

At nightfall these sportsmen would then return, muddy and tired. Later, after dinner, roulette still held its sway. Alice herself now justified me and Rose in keeping aloof from it—and in amusing her husband.

"You can't afford to play high out of your pocket-money; and it only bothers the rest to have sixpences and shillings among our sovereigns," she said. "Besides, it would worry dear old father, with his old-fashioned notions; and as to mother—she'd have a fit!" (And Alice held up her hands at the bare idea.)

Therefore, it will be seen, I had to make up my mind to few chances of seeing Clair—and those few were all silently but vigorously disputed with me by Mrs. Jessop. There was no doubt about it—we were rivals!

During two days she had treated me with effusive amenities, as Alice's sister. Then on the third at luncheon, in the South Lodge, she had eagerly called to Clair, offering a seat beside herself on the corner of a table.

"No, thanks," he replied in his lazy, almost insolently pleasant way, from where he had just established himself in a window-ledge with me and a game pie. "I am very happy here beside Miss Pleasance Brown."

A little glow of triumph warmed my heart at his words. What woman would not feel so? But it almost died in a shiver the next minute, as with a loud laugh and "Please yourself," the widow turned to those near her, remarking with gay significance:

"Let us hope want will not come in at the door, to send love out of the window."

There was a laugh over there around her: but in a subdued way that seemed to say his friends thought it near enough the truth for them to fear hurting Clair's feelings. He bit his lip—that I saw! Ah! I knew he loved me, cared for me, liked best being near me. But that widow followed him so; flattered, almost worshipped him; and he did not dislike the incense, seeing she was still a comely and agreeable woman. What man would? I asked myself in fairness of spirit; knowing it was impossible to me to go and do likewise. I was too proud to "run after him." And so, little wonder, in our bustling eager parties I was soon pushed aside. All I could do, and did, with my whole heart, was to try and bear it lovingly, patiently; and trust, with some secret tears, for the best.

But if Mrs. Jessop gave up "cultivating" my friendship, she was a thousand times the more charming to Rose, whom she called her sweet little Rosebud. And when often the latter showed herself "set about with wilful thorns," the merry widow still declared she loved a high spirit, and commended the child for not allowing herself to be snubbed.

"Going to walk with Mrs. Jessop again?" I said

with a foreboding heart, on the third afternoon this had happened. "I *wish* you did not go with her so much."

"And who else is there left to walk with, I'd like to know?" answered Rose, raising her impudent little face saucily. "You are never without Amy Pawlett fastened on you" (this was true enough), "and I think *her* tiresome. Would you have me take to Charlotte?—for it *would* be more penance than she even ever did! Then Alice has inveigled her dear Mr. Bracy away from the shooters to drive in her pony-carriage to see some ruins. He is crazy on old ruins; and, as Mrs. Jessop says, he is very like a well-preserved one himself."

"Mr. Bracy!—what a ridiculous idea!"

"Not at all. Fine old family fallen into decay, and patched up again pretty passably with commoner rubble, meaning vulgar bank-cheques. He looks it so thoroughly, too—with his quiet aristocratic air, and the way he holds his head higher than all the other men. Besides, he is getting bald; part of his hair was quite thin when I was looking at him yesterday in the full light."

"No matter for that! He is one of those men who would look well, even a good deal balder. They say it is from thinking that people lose their hair," cried I, warming up in defence of my old friend, Mr. Fulke.

"Ah, Pleasance! Pleasance! that drew you, as Bob says! Why, I thought the only man in the house you ever looked at (when you *do* look at him) was Mr. St. Leger; and he won't wear out that curly head of his with too much brain-work," cried Rose roguishly.

Then, after a few seconds—as my face must have

slightly fallen in expression at her chance shaft that was only too truly double-pointed—she added affectionately :

“But you look rather odd to-day ; not exactly moping or cross, but as if you were nervous and out of sorts. Is anything wrong with you, Pleasance dear ? Look here, I can’t well throw over the Begum, but still do come with us ! She’s not so bad after all, really.” Mrs. Jessop, we lately found, had been christened the Begum in the smoking-room, on account of her reputed wealth and gorgeous attire.

“No, no, thanks,” I answered, with indeed some nervousness and haste, as Rose had detected. “In fact I would have walked with Amy, but that I—I would rather not now, and was thinking perhaps you would take her off my hands.”

“Can’t, dear, you see ; but don’t worry about her. She can go with the rest of ‘the pack’ for to-day,” finished Rose cheerily, putting the last touches to her trim furry toilette, and dancing out of the room.

“The pack” was an expression invented by Mrs. Jessop for all the other guests who ebbed and flowed in and out of Broadhams ; whereas she had established herself evidently in intention therein for even a much longer term than ourselves, Alice’s sisters. We were always so large a party that I got to know few of these three-days’ sojourners well ; for naturally, without meaning to be exclusive, we, the nucleus of the guests, kept more together. Besides, when Alice was speedily weary of trying to “amuse these creatures” (which duty she fitfully attempted with an air of graceful toilsomeness), Lady Pawlett was always ready to take the task into her own experienced hands. She would pat Alice softly on the shoulder, saying : “Silly child ! but after all, young things will be young things, and it is quite natural you

should wish to amuse yourself, my love. Leave the drudgery to me." Certainly no more amiable sister-in-law could now be imagined. I hardly understood it at first, having been admitted to a private view of Lady Pawlett's character. But, presently, I overheard her speeding one departing guest (who had a big house of her own), with a tender clasp of the hand, and the words: "Well, good-bye, *dear*, and I *hope*" (significantly) "we shall soon see you back here again."

"Oh, thanks, dear Lady Pawlett," replied the thus partly-invited one, with a flattered air, "but I hope we shall see you first with us. Let us know when you can come, will you not? Now, pray do—you will bring your girls too, of course." In this way Lady Pawlett paid her debts of hospitality, without being at any more expense than implying some fibs; whilst she also preserved the appearance of playing still Lady Paramount in her brother's house.

It was now Saturday afternoon. And since the beginning of the week my movements, or rather want of movement and quiescence during the surrounding bustle, have been faithfully outlined.

But this day only had been—might still be, blissfully different!

Firstly, it was ordained at breakfast-time by Sir Dudley that the sportsmen should shoot a damp, dismal, outlying wood; where he was evidently delighted to tell us there was no lodge, hut, or even logs of trees that would give the ladies the slightest excuse for joining them at lunch.

Alice had pouted on this intelligence. Then the happy thought struck her that she had been longing "for ages" to see an old monastery well, with a bit of ruined wall and some loose stones likewise belonging

thereto, which lay beyond the wood. And—as every one knew how troublesome her ponies were to hold in—most reasonably some gentleman must kindly leave off his shooting by afternoon to take care of her; fixing on Bracy finally with a pretty apology, as believing him least selfish and with a fellow-feeling for all that was old and beautiful.

“For all that is young and beautiful, I should say, eh, old fellow?” muttered Sir John Dudgeon, a young brother baronet of Sir Dudley’s, who loved open-air sports, and could only endure being indoors by help of practical joking, gambling, and horse-play. He nudged Clair with a suppressed guffaw as he spoke. “There is no woman living for whom I would give up my shooting, I know! Come; what do you say?”

“It would depend a good deal on the shooting. This old wood is so deadly swampy and full of brambles, I should not have much minded giving up the fag-end of the day myself,” returned Clair lightly and pleasantly enough, but moving away. For though the Dudgeon dinners and coverts were quite to his taste, their owner was less so.

We were all in the hall watching them start. Clair’s eye had caught mine as he spoke. *Chance*—no doubt!—had lately made it so perversely difficult for him even to look at me, but now he came close by me, apparently occupied in examining his cartridge-case; paused, and said in a quick and gaily-meaning undertone: “Where do you take your walks abroad to-day, my Lady Penserosa?” Then murmured: “Do you know the old quarries and the cave under the oak-wood? Could you be there, do you think, about half-past three this afternoon—alone? and I shall manage to get away from the other guns if I can.”

It took me so by surprise, after the past three days, during which he had given not the least sign of our being more to each other than the rest of the world—that my lips quivered, despite that I bravely tried to set my face while answering: “Do you really want me?”

“Really—yes! Of course, you might know I *always* do; only that of late things have been contrary. Say you are coming, Pleasance—at last” (this in a still lower whisper).

I mutely nodded; then, with a heavy-hearted smile, repeated: “At last. It is some time since you really wanted me. But to-day you seem quite happy. What is it?”

“Well, I won a tremendous amount last night; had the most wonderful run of luck, for one thing. All the other nights I was obliged to play in order to get back some of my losses; but now”—with a joyous air—“I am free again, and this is the first use I make of my freedom. You thought me a careless brute lately, did you not, pet? but if you knew what I felt about it all on that first night you came. . . . Well, well; this afternoon you shall hear my confession, and will give the poor sinner absolution, I hope.” He had said it with a smile so tender, a tone so winning, that my whole heart went out towards him in forgiveness of what he had tacitly caused me to suffer. And yet, Heaven knew! I had been miserable.

Therefore, now I was dressing myself to go out in eager haste. Yet again I was slow of speed, because in throes of doubt which of two feathered hats became me most; hesitating in agony whether a large spotted veil or a small spot looked prettiest. Logical people might have told me that Clair would never care what I

had on, so that my efforts to please him in this way were nonsense. But logic was no strong point of mine; while I was also convinced that men always know when we look our best, though they might *not* know how the general effect was produced.

There was a knock at the door. How unlucky!

"Come in," I said, in a very small voice.

"I came to see what you were going to do this afternoon, Pleasance," said Amy Pawlett, coming in. "What, dressed! Why did you not tell me sooner, and I would have had my things on too?"

"I—did not tell you, because—well, the truth is, because I rather wished to go out alone this afternoon, Amy; if you don't think it unkind of me to say so," was my answer, given rather hesitatingly.

"Unkind! no; why should I?" said my friend in her sensible, unemotional voice; then suddenly, with a gleam of intelligence lighting up her plain features: "You are going *out* alone, you say, but . . . Well, I'm no busybody, nor a gossip about other people's matters, only—only, Pleasance darling, take care you are not trying to catch a sunbeam."

And so saying she left the room, and was gone before I could say another word to her.

CHAPTER XXII.

How thick and red the leaves lay down by the quarry wood!

I trod in them ankle-deep, and their rustle and even their dying autumn smell pleased my mood, that was

low-tuned and plaintively set, yet not without some gleams of wintry sun and hopes of future brightness as of spring. The quarry, as it was still called, had never been much worked, and not within living memory; it stood out barely in sheets of smooth natural rock here and there through the downward hanging wood.

As I went along, with almost a guilty glad feeling, hastening, yet wishing not to seem in haste—in case a pair of laughing blue eyes should be watching me unawares from among the trees or brushwood on either hand, or the quarry rocks—my own darkly dressed figure was yet the only living thing to be seen in the wintry scene around. It was the wildest, perhaps the only natural spot in all the Broadhams demesne. The sinking sun just peeped through the tree-stems to westward, and smote the quarry-top, all fringed with ivy and bramble-trails, with a warm glow.

No one here!

I looked all round, walked a little way on, then back; but there was no one to be seen.

It was lonely waiting there, but still I did not like to leave the quarry and wander further, for just beyond there were several diverging wood-paths, where I might easily miss Clair. That would have been maddening. My whole heart was set on meeting him face to face; then surely he *must* have something to say to me of his future, of—ours!

At moments my heart, that had been heavy and sick with disappointment these last days, rose up in revolt, and cried dumbly in reproach against him. Yet again I resolved not to blame him. He had been misled by others; by circumstances. My fancy was fertile in a thousand ideas to prove that his heart was true. At any rustle in the bushes, or other slightest sound, my pulses

beat so rapidly that I would gladly have run away—though my lips tried to smile a welcome with nervous gladness.

Alas! there was so much pain mingled, now, with what had been in summer my pure happiness. Would that happiness ever be the same again? was a cold, ugly doubt that crept into my mind perforce. No use thinking of it!

There were some jutting rocks at the quarry-foot, a little hidden by the brushwood, and on one of these I sat down to wait. All sorts of confused images swam through my mind; not that I did really think; for what *could* I think? All depended on Clair, not on me; and after these last three days my head was troubled by my heart.

All at once there was a little trill of music overhead. A few long inhalations made the first sharply-sweet notes, then came a prolonged twitter of pure joy. Looking up, the ashen-gray coat and red breast of a robin was visible overhead on a bare twig, his whole little body quivering with the effort and rapture of that gush of gladness. Dear small songster, when all the other feathered crowd are mute in chilly weather, save for twitterings and chirpings of recognition at eventime.

Listening to him, my heart softened imperceptibly; I knew not how or why! and to my own great surprise a rush of warm tears came into my eyes. Ah! Clair, Clair! if you only wished, I would follow you to the world's end, would slave, pinch, toil, and weary for you; nay, more, be the brain-carrier, the worker, thinker, the stronger of two through all trouble—as your wife, my heart whispered low, must needs be!

There came a hum of approaching voices.

My heart began to knock so against its cells, that

being still unaccustomed to any such action on its part, I felt quite startled with myself. Who could it be? Some of the "outsiders," no doubt. They would find me here; carry me off with them; vex Clair; interrupt our meeting.

I looked round for some place to hide. But—unless cowering down like a partridge—which my pride would never have risked the indignity of doing, there was no sufficient covert among either rocks or bushes.

Next moment they appeared in sight.

Clair and Mrs. Jessop walking closely side by side in the narrow path!—followed at a little distance by Rose and John Gladman.

The widow was chatting gaily, throwing sweet glances at Clair; as if trying by every means in her power to arrest his whole attention. He came on, carrying his gun; seeming moody and ill at ease, and not looking at her, but ahead under his lowered eyelids, so saw me first.

"What, Miss Brown!" exclaimed the widow with an affected laugh, but a gleam of something more than mere surprise in her vivacious eyes, as I made my appearance among the wintry bushes ahead of them. "Why, what are you doing here, all alone? Or, excuse me—ha, ha! *are* you alone? It looks very like an appointment, I declare. Are you waiting for some one, my dear?"

"Taking one of your favourite solitary walks?" said Clair, with contrasting studied politeness; banishing every other vestige of expression from his face, as I did not deign any reply to Mrs. Jessop and her brilliant wit, beyond a cold smile. "Won't you join us, now that we have met you?"

"Yes, yes; pray do!" chimed in Mrs. Jessop, at

once changing her tone to one of friendly warmth. And as Rose and John Gladman, coming up too, hailed me, of course I went on with them all. But I was so self-conscious of having *really* been found waiting for somebody that I could hardly find any words to say; and never dared look at Clair. As to the widow she kept up a lively fire of banter, and her spirits seemed to grow higher every minute.

At first Clair did not respond very warmly to all these advances; but still he did respond. And I inwardly envied his superior self-control to mine, for his answering gaiety was forced, I could see well enough. Presently we heard a loud halloo behind; and Bracy was seen coming after us at a swinging pace, that reminded me of the way in which he used to go over the moors and hills on Dartmoor.

"The plot thickens!" exclaimed the widow with a loud laugh as he joined us. Then she nodded her head significantly, first at him, and then at me. "This is most suspicious!—Miss Pleasance Brown walking alone in the quarry wood; and now *you* come this way too. What have you done with Lady Digges? Oh, fie!"

"What do you mean?" asked Bracy shortly enough, in a way that would have made *me* feel small, and ready to curl up like a sensitive plant. Without being ever rough, he was a masterful man; and if he did not like a speech or action could show his mind very freely. But Mrs. Jessop had no over-sensitive feelings, and began to recount in her own fashion gaily how they had met me. Bracy's eyes just scanned my face with one of those quick, kindly smiles I knew well; when he looked so, it always gave me the impression that he understood me thoroughly.

"I have only just left Lady Digges at the lodge," he

said. "We met Sir Dudley there, and, as he said he would be glad of a lift home, I gave him up my seat. No doubt, Miss Brown, you could account as easily for your presence ; but I don't see why Mrs. Jessop should catechise us all in this way."

"Neither do I," cried I, plucking up a faint spirit; for if a lover troubles, a friend encourages one. So we all went on in a group.

"Now let us have a race," cried Mrs. Jessop, as we came out of the woods on a broad gravel drive. "Come along, you dear little Roly-poly!—I'm sure you can't run"—(to Rose, who was promptly indignant). "Well, then, your sister can't; she is too meek and mild ever to do anything so wild."

"Can't she just! why, she used to go like a bird!" loudly interrupted John Gladman, whilst I looked up astonished at my rival's daring audacity of petty insult.

"What, really! I beg your pardon, my dear, but you remind me so much of Lydia Languish this afternoon, I should never have thought it."

"Haw, haw! Lydia Languish!—capital name!" shouted that good goose John, understanding nothing about it, but ready to join in everything; whilst Clair, with a man's impartiality in such feminine tiltings, looked away.

"Are we all ready? Now—one! two! three!—and away!"

Away we started. Truly never had I run with a heavier heart, fancying in my foolish way that Clair had thought my new name perhaps appropriate. Rose and I were running easily and lightly ahead of the widow, whom we could hear coming flop! flop! with heavier footfalls behind us; whilst the men amused themselves as umpires, keeping midway—when, after a few paces,

Mrs. Jessop gave an affected little outcry, and catching hold of Clair's arm, declared she was desperately hurt.

"Oh, my ankle . . . no, my foot . . . I am dead lame! don't laugh at me, you unkind creature! it is dreadfully twisted, and you will have to support me home," she cried with mock grimaces of pain, pretending to be hardly able to stand.

"What a humbug you are!—you are not hurt in the least," I heard Clair say, as if amused at her nonsense, as we paused.

"Indeed!—indeed I am though, a little!" and with a clinging, helpless gesture, which to me seemed in such a big woman intensely silly, even disgusting—she clasped his arm with both her hands, and looked up pathetically in his eyes. For the moment she was not aware we had stopped; or else did not care. But then, perceiving our battery of stern or curious vision fixed on her, begged of us in a soft, altered voice not to "trouble ourselves waiting."

"You girls can run on and have your race. Mr. Gladman and Mr. Bracy will take care of you both—won't you, Mr. Gladman?—while we come slowly on."

Bracy to this never answered a word.

"But we're so awfully sorry if you are hurt," returned John dubiously; then regarding Rose and myself, he added: "As to the Miss Browns—why, of course, I can take care of them; how 'happy could I be with either'—only we'd rather not leave you."

Rose was looking rather oddly at her friend. I could not say a syllable, there was such pain in my breast. I never knew till then that jealousy or hurt love meant bodily pain—real dull soreness of heart, lasting sickeningly for a minute or two—after that woman had

clasped Clair's arm so, and given such a look up in his eyes.

The first time!—happy that I was, without knowing it! Many a time in many months that followed (though, thank God, not in later years) did I come to know that same dull ache only too well. To have a sore heart is no mere figure of speech as some people fancy.

Well, though I said never a word, and the widow persisted we must be sighing to return home more quickly, but need not wait for her, Rose declared we could not think of being so unkind. She was stoutly echoed by John Gladman, who was urgent to help Clair to carry the widow, by making a "lady's chair," clasping each other's wrists. The scornful look with which she refused this generous offer made him cross; so that, plunging his hands in his pockets, he turned his back, muttering: "*We're not wanted!* Let us walk on."

We went on, therefore, keeping in front, feeling uncomfortable all the way. I dared not look round—yet my ears seemed set painfully to hear what passed behind, though I hated myself for eavesdropping; but honour towards my rival seemed slipping away from me. As to Fulke Bracy, he came too, but hardly said a word; whilst John Gladman and Rose alone chatted.

Slowly we reached the Broadhams door, which was not, however, far distant. Then Rose waited for her friend, who came leaning certainly heavily on Clair's arm, but I was *certain* only shamming a little limp.

"Gladman!"—called out St. Leger as he relinquished his charge, who assured him with thanks, and no doubt truthfully, that she was much better—"Gladman, I want to go round to the stables; will you come?"

So that meant good-bye to me.

He met my eyes in passing, then looked away in a manner that, rightly or wrongly, made me think Mrs. Jessop had rallied him about finding me by the quarry. One makes wild guesses at these things, and sometimes comes very near the truth.

As the rest dispersed, Fulke Bracy came up to me.

"You were going to say something," I said inquiringly, turning with a weary feeling as he seemed about to speak, then stopped himself.

"Yes—no. Nothing—except that—won't you have a glass of wine? You are looking quite pale; that run was too much for you. Do let me get you some." He looked at me, as he spoke, with such real solicitude in his handsome face and kindly eyes, that my heart warmed to my old friend. Feeling nervous and disappointed, it was with difficulty I could restrain a gush of tears, though trying to laugh brightly at him while refusing.

Then my escape was hastily made; but glancing back from the inner hall, I saw Mr. Bracy looking after me with an expression of only the more concern, undeceived by my guile.

CHAPTER XXIII.

HALF-AN-HOUR later, I was lying on my bed, believing myself utterly alone in the great lonely room; and—what woman can doubt it?—weeping! Weeping, not loudly; but as if my only wish had been to dissolve myself, my pain, and all my troubled being away in tears.

Oh, it was weary work, living and loving ! How much better it would be to care for none beyond those of one's own family circle, who never agonised us thus ! So it seemed to me dimly in my sorrow. Surely it was hard of fate that other girls should be so happy in their engagements, and my love bring me only mortification and sorrow. Then two arms came round me, a shocked little voice exclaimed : "Pleasance, dearest, I never saw you cry so before !" and Rose was kissing me. She being younger, and the pet and plaything, whilst I was graver and older, our Rose had never come out in the light of a comforter before ; but being such a sensible, practical small soul for her age, few could give consolation better.

"What is it that vexed you so ?" Rose had asked ; and then as I only murmured, trying to assure her it was all a nothing, she answered herself : "It was something about Mrs. Jessop and Mr. St. Clair, wasn't it ? There was such a curious look in your eyes. Dear Pleasance ! do tell me."

So I told her ; though what I said I hardly knew.

"Then you are engaged to him ?" said Rose in a rather awed voice, eyeing me with immense respect.

"No, no, no," I returned impressively, raising myself on my arm to enforce the true state of matters upon her, and explain what Clair had said of his involved affairs, his hopes of some congenial employment, and meanwhile reluctance to bind me.

"Oh, bother his reluctance ! I call that horrid. I'd much rather be either on or off. No wonder you cry about it," exclaimed Rose, with almost a sparkle of wet in her own bright eyes. "I declare it's a shame ; and you ought to tell him you won't have it."

"He could not help it, really. It is all the fault of

his upbringing. He has always amused himself, and never did work before," I pleaded. "If we *had* only met to-day as he asked me he would have told me all. How was it you both met him?"

"Mrs. Jessop *would* go towards the wood. They were shooting, and then we met him coming alone away from it. I do not think he wanted to meet us; but you know when people have to look pleasant it's so hard to know. Then John Gladman saw us; so Mrs. Jessop chaffed him, saying three was bad company! And *he* certainly was very glad to come," said Rose reflectively. "I wonder if she did guess . . . ?"

"Ah, that widow! If she would but leave him alone," I moaned.

"Yes; but then, you see, *she likes him too!* It would be very nice if everybody else would just let us have things the way we want; but I suppose they think the world was made for them as well," said Rose, with a wise air of seeing both sides of the question, but a soft, low sigh that made the reproving words fall gently on my wounded spirit.

Her remark did me good. Why, how true it was! I had been lately wishing all things to go just as I pleased, not thinking of my neighbours, and their wants; as they knew not, or cared little for, my secret ones.

Rose and her loving consolation indeed so strengthened me, that this evening I came downstairs with my face a little paler than usual, and my eyes heavier—but my heart resolved on patience and steadfastness.

It was all needed; for still things went amiss, and again my spirit grew heavier, though not so weak as heretofore. Sir Dudley was very sulky, and ate even four times more than was good for him.

"He's a perfect dog in the manger," said Alice, with high temper and an excitable air, signing to Mrs. Jessop to come near where we three sisters stood together before dinner, and then—only then to her new friend—disburthening her mind of the evident grievances Rose and I had already perceived.

It seemed enough to let us stand by and listen to her confidences, yet we two cared for her as this Jenny Jessop never would. "Dudley is so selfish, I am sure it would not give *him* the least pleasure to drive with me; for I can hardly ever find a word to say to him. He has absolutely no conversation; none! And yet he is so grumpy because I took Fulke Bracy out to-day instead of him! I like that; as if I might not have *my* particular friend!"

"Still, do make it up with him—do take Sir Dudley out another day," I pleaded, wincing slightly at the term, "*my* friend," applied by Alice to Fulke Bracy.

"Don't give in, my dear!—If you once begin that, there is no knowing where it may come to. Nail your colours to the mast; and *pull* back you up!" declared Mrs. Jessop, clapping her on the shoulder, and speaking in the same breath as myself.

There was a great enough contrast in our words. There was as much, or more, in our persons. Buxom, tight-waisted, merry-eyed, with her high complexion and black hair, the widow made me feel a slight, colourless, shadowy creature beside her. She was so much brighter, more amusing and self-confident than me; no wonder a man should like her better, I grievously thought in fairness. And yet surely, surely I might feel rightly conscious of having more heart and brain!

Alice and Mrs. Jessop began whispering together. I was roused to observe them by seeing my sister nod

acquiescingly, with a rallying air, to some eagerly urged request of her friend. Then Alice called out: "We are all to draw lots for going in to dinner. Somebody must write down all the gentlemen's names on slips of paper (oh! Amy—Charlotte Pawlett—you two won't mind doing it? And Pleasance shall help you)."

We ladies all drew lots accordingly; Alice holding the hat. Mrs. Jessop drew out—Clair St. Leger's name. There was a significant smile on my sister's face as she looked at her friend afterwards, that my watchful eyes noted, but it did not make me angry now. It all seemed just what must come, and had to be borne.

And that night the play was higher than ever; and Clair St. Leger lost back all his winnings—and far more.

And all that night, nothing witting of what was passing, I, fired by Rose's spirit, made a resolve; and waked and thought, or dozed and dreamed, upon it with fearfulness, yet determination.

CHAPTER XXIV.

NEXT morning I woke, or rather forced myself to rise, with the weary feeling that a troubled Sunday was before me.

We went to church, that is, those of our party who were really piously or pharisaically disposed. Of course Rose and I went, the Pawletts, some of the short-stay visitors, John Gladman, and Mr. Bracy.

"Are you going?" Alice hurriedly asked as, when the

carriages came round, she saw the latter appearing with a churchward air; and there was a quick light in her eyes. "I thought you would have stayed."

"No; I'm going, Lady Digges," responded Bracy, hardly looking at her, and in a rough tone. Well, no; not that. He was far too good and kind to be rough to any one, but still he never spoke to me in that curt voice, or my easily hurt sensibilities would have been mortified. He added: "You are not going to say your prayers, I see——"

"Oh yes, yes; I am. Only I am rather late. No matter, the brougham must wait for me. Will *you* keep the brougham back, Mr. Bracy, and send on the other people, please?" And away Alice hurried to put on her bonnet.

Bracy coolly repeated her orders to the servants near, and then started off to walk alone.

"I say, Fulke, don't you want me?" asked John Gladman, rushing three steps after him; then halting, and eyeing a waggonette in which Rose and I were already seated alone—being the earliest dressed for our devotions—with a wistful eye.

"Want you, my dear fellow! No. I would not have you at any price. You had much better stay and take care of the young ladies," replied his older friend, smiling on his admiring and constant follower.

It was impossible to mistake Alice's look of disappointment when she came downstairs. Likewise I noticed nervously Lady Pawlett's lofty eyes upon her, and the sweetly-amused voice in which that lady asked:

"Whom do you mean to have with you now, dear, as your cavalier has deserted you?"

"Where is Jenny Jessop?" asked Alice sharply;

but the widow, as I knew beforehand only too well, was not coming to her devotions. And Clair St. Leger had not yet appeared in the world downstairs, when we started.

How hard I tried to fix my mind on the prayers that morning; and, alas! my foolish heart, how difficult it was! The whole service was a struggle between my wandering thoughts and the effort to get, to almost force consolation from the divine promises which applied to trials and temptations, suffered for religion's sake—but not for love's sake!

And love was all that is worth living for, it seemed to me then; without thinking the thought out clearly, or daring to avow it to myself, weak, foolish girl that I was.

Afterwards, the carriages brought us back to dull, gray Broadhams house. Hurriedly taking off my bonnet in my room, I hastened downstairs.

All our little Broadhams world assembled before lunch in the long saloon. There was Clair—whom I had so longed to speak to all the morning; but how do so now, and tell him what lay so heavily on my mind, amongst all these people?

He looked dull and abstracted in manner, and so avoided my wistful eyes that it gave me a tightening pain around the heart. I did not know of his losses at play on the preceding night; and so, not knowing, misjudged him, thinking only he was vexed with me—it might be because of our meeting having gone wrong on the day before, or because the widow had teased him. So, never guessing he looked away because ashamed of having played again, I grew wild in heart and foolishly excited. My great resolve formed overnight of seeing him, and having some explanation, was so urgent and hot in my heart, that it seemed unbearable to be close

to him and not dare to say those words. How the free-and-easy atmosphere of Broadhams must have influenced me, that—after trembling the first evening at meeting Clair in a gallery, used as a passage, and at his earnest request—I now resolved he *should* meet me, at my wish, and where we were not likely to be disturbed! It was not that I felt careless of consequences like the other people here, but desperate.

Moved by sudden impulse, I rose abruptly, and went into a small writing-room. It formed part of the saloon, being only screened off by curtains looped back from an open doorway. Here sitting down, within hearing of the hum of the voices in the other room, I dashed off a few lines; yet they seemed cold as if wet, not with ink, but the still tears of pride and love. The very words I know no more now than if a stranger wrote them; but the matter—the outcry from a woman's aching heart, which was being wrung quietly but effectually—that memory remains!

"I wish to speak to you a few moments—in private. If even you were the most ordinary acquaintance of mine you will come, being a gentleman, at my desire!" This was at least the sense of what was expressed, ending: "I shall be in the Observatory Tower this afternoon, soon after three!"

Before the last words were finished, came a voice from the doorway, which Mrs. Jessop had entered, and which she fairly filled.

"What hot haste you are writing in, Miss Brown! I am so sorry, but *are* you aware the post is already gone?" she asked, surveying me with laughing, criticising black orbs.

Murmuring that it did not matter—my letter would keep—my pen faltered.

"Pray don't let me stop you," cried the widow, leaning caryatid fashion against the doorway, and giving a glance into the other room. Then, mounting guard as it seemed, she satirically hummed :

"Three little mice sat down to spin,
Pussy passed by, and she peeped in.
'What are you doing, my little men?'
'Writing notes to gentlemen.'"

Oh, horror! The tell-tale blood rushed to my cheeks, dying them hotly, agonisingly crimson. I put up my hand to screen my face, and leant my hand on it so; trying to seem as if meditating on how to finish; but a cold fear was on me that the widow was not deceived by the feint.

Then, hastily blotting the wet sheet on a virgin page of the blotting-book, I thrust the note into an envelope, and putting it into my pocket, walked steadily into the next room.

But—what was next to be done?

To the end of my life I shall never forget the uneasiness of the few following minutes. It was too daring to address Clair openly. He was standing by a group, rather than amongst it, listening abstractedly to Sir Dudley in the centre, declaiming that lunch was five minutes late and consulting everybody's watch. I moved as near as courage allowed, not knowing what to do.

Chance was kind, however. For as I stood turning over an album of English scenery, in doubt and trouble, a view caused me to exclaim :

"Mr. St. Leger, do come and look at this! This lake reminds me so much of ours at Stoke. . . ."

Before Clair had roused himself from his air of

graceful indolence at my call, however, Fulke Bracy, hearing the name of Stoke, was at my side in a moment.

"Where? That! Well, yes; it *has* rather a resemblance," he said with deep interest, but some disappointment.

"Ah! you know Stoke too well. A comparative stranger to its beauties, like Mr. St. Leger, may see the likeness more than the many differences."

So saying, and needing the greatest effort to keep my lips from trembling with nervousness at what I dared to do, I—who had been the bashful, modest, and proud Pleasance of a half-year ago—turned to Clair, begging pardon pitifully with my eyes, as I rather awkwardly slipped my note upon the page, holding up the book to hide it. Quick as lightning, Clair's fingers closed upon my missive, so dexterously that even I hardly perceived the action; then it was somehow hidden, while not a muscle of his face moved the while. Even with the feeling of intense relief as I breathed again freely, came the quick thought that *he* seemed well used to such a method of delivering messages; while I was a shamefaced novice. At that moment I raised my head—Mrs. Jessop was regarding us with a steady, inquiring stare: the only look I had almost ever seen her give without her laughing-mask on. She could have seen nothing; but evidently she was suspicious. No matter, the deed was done! she could not hinder it now; and the feeling of shame had passed away, for I believed my action was, in truth, right. It was my firm intention to offer Clair St. Leger again the freedom for himself which he seemed—ah! my heart, he *did* seem, in spite of all—to wish.

Then lunch was announced, to Sir Dudley's satisfaction, and most of us trooped in; except a few like

Bracy who never so indulged themselves; and the widow, who lingered behind.

"Don't mind me," she answered, as Alice called to her to come with herself—for they generally went in arm-in-arm now, like a couple of school-girls. "This is fast-day with me; you need not laugh! and I have got some writing to do, besides."

"You are afraid of growing too stout, Mrs. Jessop, that is the *truth*! I suppose," said Charlotte Pawlett severely, in passing, being shocked at the joke about fastings. Charlotte became daily more and more harsh with herself and every one else; therewith at the same time throwing off her mother's yoke which had made her such an un-individual being hitherto.

"Well, thank heaven! I am plump, and not scraggy. Ask the gentlemen, all, whether they don't admire a woman with a figure more than a drooping willow or a clothes-rail," retorted Mrs. Jessop with vulgar insolence, glancing at Charlotte's severe outlines and my slimmer person who was innocently near.

Sir John Dudgeon heard her and burst into a horse-laugh, remarking:

"That's it, Mrs. Jessop. Don't give in. I'd back you to hold your own in a war of words against any lady I ever knew;" adding in an affectedly pathetic whisper: "Poor number one! What a life *he* must have led!"

The widow shook her head reprovingly at this sally of the rich youth, and retired to the writing-table. But after eight minutes she appeared amongst us all in the dining-room with some excuse; where she was persuaded into an excellent lunch, after all.

That afternoon at the appointed hour, I was waiting alone in the Observatory Tower. This was a solitary

building, like one of the "Follies" created at view-spots by numberless owners of country-places throughout the land; only this was the more foolish in that it commemorated nobody and commanded no view, but that of three drives cut through the flat Broadhams woods, now leafless—which drives, narrowing in perspective, ended in gray cloud.

One Digges baronet, of astronomical aspirations, had erected it with a view to becoming that rarity, a scientific squire. But he died before his hobby had been completed, and his successor turned it into a dining-room for such picnicking neighbours as did not care to sit tailor-fashion on wet grass, and find grasshoppers in their champagne, and other strange little beasties in their food. It was in a solitary situation about half-a-mile from the house. The basement story was occupied by a worthy couple, whom in my late walks with Amy Pawlett we had already come to know; but the upper door, reached by steps, and leading to the visitors' round room, was always unlocked by day to shelter any chance guest.

Here I was sitting on that gray winter afternoon, waiting with frightened expectancy; fearful of my own daring; and so heart-sick that I should almost have snatched at any chance of fleeing from the interview I had sought with such difficulty. The room was stiff, cheerless, and cold; so that, wrapped in furs though I was, it seemed to freeze the very heart and soul in me. The floor was inlaid in wood, in a wavy pattern that arrested my eyes perforce; and it was worm-eaten here and there. How distinctly I remembered later every detail! The furniture consisted of a few chairs, rudely carved, just enough so to be uncomfortable without being ornamental; an octagonal dining-table, and some stags' heads between the three tall, prospectless windows.

I was sitting away from the windows, too proud to appear watching—yet with my heart going pit-a-pat so often it would have been an intense relief to do *anything*. Five times already my watch had been consulted, put to my ear in doubt, as it told, surely lyingly! that only twenty minutes had crept miserably by in the world's history and my small life; otherwise, I forced myself to be still. Oh, Clair, Clair, what a valley of trouble, misty doubts, and heart-aches you had led my life down into since last summer; when it had been so free of care, its horizon golden with the fair hopes of my age.

The door below was all at once opened and clanged to. There came the sound of a man's step up the stone staircase; and I turned the more pallid and cold with apprehension, for having forced on this interview. Yes! while meaning to offer Clair his absolute freedom, the fear that all *might* be broken off so filled me with trembling, that it seemed a thousand times better *now* to have gone on clinging to indefinite hopes—even so long as he chose to let me suffer.

Into those few seconds, a world of agony was compressed.

The door opened—and Fulke Bracy appeared on the threshold.

CHAPTER XXV.

WHAT I said or did, on Fulke Bracy's unexpected appearance, I do not know; but my great surprise must have been only too evident, since he stopped short—

came forward a few steps—hesitated, then asked : “Has there been any mistake? I understood that you were expecting me—that is, that you wished me to come here and meet you.”

“You, Mr. Bracy!—*I never wished to see you!*”

“What! Then what did Mrs. Jessop mean?”

“Mrs. Jessop! *What* did she say?”

“She told me—or at least certainly gave me to understand—that you were going to walk by yourself to the tower here; and that when your little interview was over, you would no doubt like, she said, to have our companionship home.”

“My interview!” I stammered; then sat down on a chair, feeling white to my very lips, and absolutely incapable of standing if I wished to preserve an appearance of self-possession. A sudden intelligence lightened Fulke Bracy’s eyes, and stepping near me he uttered, almost unawares :

“You *were* coming to meet some one else, then? I beg your pardon for saying so—but, indeed, you may trust me as a friend, Miss Pleasance.”

“What did Mrs. Jessop say? What do you mean by my interview?” were my faltering replies—being so new to deception I never dreamt of denial.

“I don’t know what Mrs. Jessop meant. *I* only thought you were bound on an errand of mercy to the old couple below-stairs; for they told me the other day, when I came round here and was chatting to them, how good you were in trying to cure them of rheumatism and other ailments. But, for goodness sake, come outside now”—as I sat still, motionless, and incapable of understanding what to do, it seemed, in this emergency—“Come! quick—command yourself; make an effort, do! It is impossible for you to stay now, for Mrs.

Jessop and Sir John Dudgeon are waiting below-stairs for us."

At his tone of earnest, rousing remonstrance I rose up hastily, and feeling turned to stone followed down the staircase, whilst my good friend of childhood's days led the way; once or twice turning to look rather anxiously towards me.

Arrived at the outer door, which ended the winding stairs, he turned the handle, but the door did not open; again—but still in vain! next more violently he shook and tried it in every way. It seemed to me then that a suppressed laugh was heard outside; certainly, there was the hurried sound of departing footsteps, for Bracy exclaimed:

"They have locked us in!" Springing upstairs, he tried to see out of the loop-holed window that lit the stair—but it was too high! Then he rushed back into the round room, where I followed him. From the window nearest the door, we just caught a glimpse of the widow and Sir John Dudgeon escaping across the open greensward around the tower, evidently in convulsions of laughter at the exquisite result of their joke. Mr. Bracy tried to throw up the window-sash to call out; but utterly in vain. Either damp or carpenter's handiwork had hermetically sealed it.

Just then, a short, active figure in a well-known light-coloured suit was distinguishable, emerging alone from some side-path in the wood, and entering the broad grass drive down which Sir John and Mrs. Jessop were retreating. It was Clair St. Leger. I should have known him even at twice the distance. By his forward bending I felt, rather than saw, that Bracy beside me was watching the result, too, earnestly; but what was that to my anxious eagerness of gaze? Yet, while straining my

eyes, I still was sufficiently aware of his presence to control myself. The three figures met: there seemed a short consultation—next, slowly, as with a doubtful air, or so I fancied, although they were too far off to distinguish much in reality, Clair turned and went with them. But it was not too far to see that he walked alone, keeping a yard or so away from the widow; flicking at the dead brambles and underwood with his stick as he went; whilst Sir John Dudgeon, on the contrary, went gaily close by her side. Then they disappeared into the wood.

When they were quite gone, and not till then, Fulke Bracy and I turned, meeting each other's eyes full. Moved by a quick pitying impulse, and forgetting I was no longer the little girl he used to know, he kindly said:

"This is too bad. It is a shameful hoax—but don't mind, like a good child; and it will all come right! St. Leger could not well help himself, after meeting them. It would have exposed you to all sorts of unkind remarks. . . ."

"Oh, don't! for pity's sake," as, utterly breaking down at his words—first moved by his kindness, and then conjuring up all the scandal and evil speaking that might follow—I covered my face with both hands, weeping and shamefaced, and leant on the table beside which I had sunk down on a chair.

"What have I said?—*don't* cry any more!" reiterated Fulke, greatly moved by my trouble, and at once thinking himself to blame for it. "I only meant to say, they might have guessed something—but they could not have *known* anything, so don't make yourself so unhappy."

"They will all know; you knew! That woman,

Mrs. Jessop, she will make a good story of it, and tell *every one!*" I uttered in desperation, raising streaming eyes to his face.

"She shall not! I will stop her doing that."

"You! But how could you stop her? Ah! you don't know her. You need put no trust in her good-nature."

"Heaven forbid. I do know her well; even better than you," was Bracy's forcible answer. "For that very reason, I can make her hold her peace; as I remember certain stories about herself she might not care to have told."

"But indeed, indeed, I don't believe you would blame me if—if only you understood all about it!" I pleaded, horrified at seeming such a culprit; "for I have been so miserable; and it has seemed so impossible to meet in the house. Still, I did want to know how things really stood—if even all is to be broken off . . ." and at that, unable to finish, my head sank down again, and sobs shook me like a reed in spite of strongest endeavours.

"Blame you! that I feel sure I never should," exclaimed Bracy's voice nearer overhead, in warm indignation. "Poor child! I thought there was some engagement, last autumn, the night of your ball; but why all this secrecy and trouble about it? Surely your parents—your father is so kind; he would consent, if you only tell him."

"But I am not to tell him; at least not just yet," I replied low and small. Then, as a murmur of suppressed astonishment came almost equally low from Fulke Bracy's lips, I sat more upright, and hurriedly, in broken words, explained the matter; why or in what manner I did not think, except feeling that now it was best he should

know the whole reason of my being here—and that he was an old friend, and one to be trusted. Although this last was a very woman's reason, considering how little we had really met since Dartmoor days,

“I think” *him* “so, because I think” *him* “so.”

From impulse, or secret sympathy, or whatever other hidden cause, I had always looked upon Bracy as my especial friend; and being a middle-aged man—quite an *old* man, so I mentally phrased it—one to be confided in. In fact, my feeling for him was like what Hazlitt wishes for himself: “I would have my friends love me as I love myself, without any reason.” It was not that he had ever singled me out, or flattered or admired me; as had Clair, who thus taught me first to love him.

“So I am free, in a manner—though *he* considered himself bound! And he meant to get some work to do for my sake, as he was so poor. But since we came here, he seems to care as much for Mrs. Jessop's society as mine,” I ended low, in bitterness of soul.

“Poor child!—*Poor Pleasance!*” burst out Fulke; then remembering he had used my name in his heat familiarly, and being a very punctilious man on the score of invariable courtesy, he reddened in a way I should have almost thought impossible at his age under my momentarily surprised gaze.

Looking out of the window, and with his face sternly set, as he now sat opposite me, he went on quietly, but with decided, if subdued, emphasis: “Of course, it is not my place to set myself up as judge in this particular case. Still a man—in my opinion—ought to know his own mind before he commits himself so far in gaining the affections of any girl. Surely St. Leger is not so badly off either, if he only chose to retrench! . . . I know”

(speaking more softly and slowly) "I should be sorry to do as he is doing."

"Don't abuse him. I will not have him spoken against like that!" I hotly cried, flaring out in unreasonable wrath upon my own defender. "No doubt you have led such a different hardworking life of business, that you can't be expected to enter into his feelings. But he was brought up to do nothing at all; in every comfort, if not luxury, in his own country house—and was left his own master quite young. And he loved sport, and—and everything of that kind; no wonder! when he is so good at it. So it must seem more hard on him now than for others not to have the means to live as he would like."

No answer. My friend and mentor had raised his eyebrows ever so slightly, then compressed his lips, but did not speak.

"Please don't be offended with me!" I continued in my foolishness, still excited, but recognising his goodness. "Remember, you are so much older a man. Perhaps at his age, you might have felt too as he does about his enjoyments."

Bracy turned round upon me and smiled, as if despite himself.

"What appalling age do you take me to be? Why, I am only five years older than St. Leger! No matter for that; but you are a woman, a very woman! asking sympathy when you are hardly treated, and then—when with my whole heart I am sorry for you and honestly say so—you turn upon and rend me."

Ashamed of myself, I began stammering excuses and protestations. Verily, as the old saying goes, lovers in their quarrels are like the blades of a pair of scissors; apart now, but ready to close on whoever tries to inter-

pose between them. But Fulke Bracy interrupted me, to continue with a humorous yet reproachful smile :

"Wait, please, Miss Pleasance. There is one more thing I never expected you to say, after all your kind sympathy with my sentimental feelings the night of your ball—when I saw Stoke, my own former old home, again. When you speak of the difference between me and St. Leger, do you forget that I was brought up in my own country place too? I was led to expect an inheritance, which I may say without conceit would have been considerably greater than his? And I cannot believe, as to tastes, that any lad then, or many men now, could care for a country gentleman's life and all its pursuits and pleasures more than I did—*and do!*"

He rose, as if disturbed at the recollection, and walked to the window. His tone was so different from what I had been used to (because, for the first time almost since I knew him, not occupied with others' wants or wishes, but revealing his feelings about himself), that my eyes seemed opened as they looked after him.

Only five years older than Clair, too! My old friend, Mr. Fulke—not so old after all! My eyes seemed unsealed from their childish silliness of judgment on our first meeting, and from love's selfishness later. In this new light, I took quite a new mental survey of my friend.

He was certainly taller than most men, and broader; becoming just a little heavy in build perhaps, which was pleasing enough as he was not *stout*. He carried his head with an especially high air too, although such a kindly gray-eyed man. Truly—it must be confessed—his hair, that was fair or light-brownish, *was* growing decidedly thin on the crown of his well-shapen head.

But with that same excellent gift of a finely-outlined cranium, what does slight baldness matter?

Altogether, thus seeing him with enlightened vision, I could not but own Fulke Bracy did look the very type of an English country gentleman. He was a true heir of the long line of Bracys who had been born and bred at Stoke, ruling there as thanes from the days of Athelstan till their fair Saxon heiress married a Norman knight; after which an unbroken manly line of stout and proud country squires had succeeded each other, father and son—till the summer morning when this last of them bade farewell for ever to his pleasant home of Stoke. For, on the evening before, we Browns had entered into our new possession.

With the curious sympathy of thought often experienced between two persons in company, Bracy a moment after raised his head and uttered aloud: "Yes; it did seem a terrible wrench to see the last of the dear old place. Do you remember how I leaped the garden wall, early that morning when you discovered me? I shall never forget my thoughts as I went away through the fields and woods, where every leaf and blade of grass seemed to know me. The most money-making business seemed only vile drudgery in my eyes that morning, except as a means to . . ." He stopped abruptly; then said after a short pause: "But, now, we must see how to get out of this place. Cheer up; it is not likely yet to prove a Ugolino's tower, and believe me" (kindly) "you have nothing else to fear. So, don't look so dejected."

"I am not dejected now, Mr. Bracy; you are such a good friend to me."

"Then you must not look so woebegone still. Yours is one of the most honest faces I know; for it

tells all your thoughts in a way you hardly dream of—to any one with discerning eyes.”

“No; does it really?” I exclaimed in dismay, involuntarily putting up my hands to conceal the traitorous features. Fulke Bracy laughed.

“Don’t be alarmed. You have only good and kind thoughts to show. There! that is a compliment for you, and what is more, I *mean it*. But now, how to get out of this place? The windows are rather too high to jump out of,”—and he measured the distance to the ground with his eye.

“Don’t think of it! You would be killed,” I cried in horror. “No, no; let us go downstairs. The old couple below are gone to afternoon service in the school-house, but we might find another key.”

“Come then,” said Bracy, glad to rouse me; but alas! in all the trim little kitchen, neither in drawers nor dresser, among the brightly-scrubbed coppers and tins, nor in any of the several old teapots, into each of which I carefully peeped, was any key to be seen. We were fast shut in.

I looked at Fulke without his being aware of it; and was almost surprised to see how grave he was, his brows bent together, while he gnawed the tip of his moustache.

“After all, it does not so greatly matter. They will soon come to let us out; and they cannot say much about my being here with you,” was my next remark, by way of pretending a cheerfulness far from real.

He grimly smiled.

“Is that a tribute to respectable age or my well-known good character? However, I quite agree with you, that it *would* be hard indeed if any unkind remarks were made upon us after being the victims of

such a bad joke. Well, at least you can be warm here instead of shivering upstairs. Won't you sit down?"

He placed a chair for me by the fire ; but I had an uneasy conviction that he was far from being as assured in his own mind as he tried to seem. For some little time he moved restlessly around the small round room, playing with the caged linnet hung in the window, examining the thumbed Bible on its sill. Finally, seating himself in the old man's corner-chair, he eyed the coals silently. For me, I was too oppressed with a returning sense of my own frustrated plan, and all the troubles and fears roused thereby making sick turmoil in my brain, to care to speak. Half-an-hour passed in this silence, each occupied with our own thoughts.

It was a strange scene.

At last, feeling I *must* rouse, and that my companion was respecting my preoccupation of mind—I sat upright, saying in a tired voice that *would not* sound light :

"It seems too bad you should lose your afternoon's walk, to be shut up here in dullness with me."

"Don't say that," returned Fulke ; speaking so fluently and immediately that, unless his whole silence had been taken up in thinking of my concerns, it would have been impossible he should have answered so—as struck me afterwards ; though at the time in my selfishness it seemed natural enough. "Don't think so ! For I am only too glad you should have thought me worthy of confidence to-day ; although unfortunately there seems so little chance of my being able to help—and yet it might be possible." This slowly and musingly. Then rousing up : "Well, where there is a will there is a way, is nearly always true ; and if a man is in earnest about anything, surely he ought to be so about this."

"You mean—Mr. St. Leger!"

"Of course I do. Good heavens! when one thinks of it! . . . Your happiness to be perhaps sacrificed, at least trembling in the balance, whilst some other men would be so gladly in his shoes." . . . I looked up utterly startled, and he went on almost roughly:

"Yes; there is one honest fellow, at least—you may think little of him because of his plain outward appearance, but I can answer for his real goodness of heart; and his mother would welcome you with the greatest joy. Pleasance!—as you are not really engaged, will you not think twice of this? With John Gladman you would at any rate have the assurance of a happy home." . . .

"*John Gladman!*" my voice echoed, in a tone of intense astonishment. "*He* want to marry me? What an absurd idea! His mother was always fond of me, certainly; and I love her dearly . . . so I suppose she has advised him, and he has obediently made up his mind to ask me. Or, no!—he is much more likely to ask *you* to do so for him."

I had hit the mark. My old friend looked so conscious, and played nervously with his watch-chain. He only returned:

"Would it be anything so very strange if he had so commissioned a friend?"

"It would! Imagine respecting—marrying a man who had not courage to speak for himself!" cried I, blushing and laughing. "It is all nonsense; indeed it is, Mr. Bracy. He likes me in an every-day way, very likely; but beyond that he cares for me no more than you do."

"Who, I?—oh, I am only your aged counsellor, your venerable mentor and faithful servitor. Pray don't speak as if I was young enough for any woman ever to

care for me, *now*," answered Bracy, with a rather forced, inappropriate laugh, as it seemed to me. Then springing to his feet, he began pacing up and down, like any lion in a Zoo.

Clearly my "venerable mentor and faithful servitor" was offended. But how or why was utterly dark to me, in the innocence of my heart. Quite sorry and puzzled, I was hesitating—ready to rush into apologies, but really not knowing what to say—when the noise of the tower-door being violently opened was heard. Then Sir Dudley's voice shouting, and himself following, came down the stairs.

"Bracy, hi! I say—Bracy! Pleasance! Pleasance Brown, are you there? . . . Now, then—what the devil is the meaning of this?"

CHAPTER XXVI.

MY brother-in-law's manner was so rough, not to say churlish, that I shrank back under his gaze; being unhappily not conscious of perfect innocence.

But Fulke Bracy was not the man, and less than ever in a mood now, to allow himself to be treated in an overbearing manner by any one—even by his host. He answered in as high a tone as Sir Dudley's own, like a masterful man, who simply cannot suppose that his rightful actions are capable of misconstruction; yet with a haughty gentleness, in deference to my presence, as he turned courteously to me twice while speaking, that

made me look up to him in admiration. My brother-in-law only seemed to think of me as a young woman towards whom he had a family right to be rude if it pleased him. However, being a little of a bully and easily cowed by *men*—besides, not otherwise a bad fellow at heart—the evident blame which had been black on his brow subsided visibly as Mr. Bracy explained rather angrily—and by no means apologetically—our presence in the tower.

Then we went homewards. What an uncomfortable walk it was!

Sir Dudley never spoke to me once; showing plainly I was in disfavour. And though he certainly did converse with his other companion on the subject of farming in general, especially the top-dressing of certain poor land we passed, it was in a dogged way—as if he forced his brief sentences out through his bushy beard from no liking, but only a difficult effort at politeness.

Fulke Bracy talked to me as often as the drift in the discourse would allow. But my heart was too heavy to respond, and my brain too full of fears that my secret would soon be known to all Broadhams. If they knew that I had gone to meet Clair—if—if they did! I groaned within myself. Oh, the laughter, the jeers!

Yet, withal, I drew myself together to face the worst of the gossip and malicious mirth which might ensue.

"I think Alice is waiting in her boudoir. She wants to speak to you," muttered Sir Dudley to me aside, as we arrived at the door: though not so delicately but that Mr. Bracy overheard him, for he gave me a quick look of real pity.

"Yes?—I was going to see her in any case," was my quiet reply, given with apparently perfect self-possession.

Alice certainly was "waiting for me;" for she was

sitting alone, apparently busied "nursing her wrath to keep it warm." Her pretty cheeks were aflame as if they were dyed dark red; while her glittering eyes showed she was in such a rage—surpassing far the little tempers we knew so well in her—as made me at the door suddenly stop, though keeping my ground.

"Well, Miss!—so there you are! Oh, *you are back*—are you really? Well, I *should* like—I should very much like to know what you have got to say for yourself!" she reiterated. Plainly her anger was so impossible to put into words, that she hardly knew what she said, with an attempt at sarcasm that would have been ludicrous but that to me it was so painful. Then, as I began to try and comply with her request for information, trying my best to be calm, she burst in violently: "Oh, *don't* talk to me! . . . If you imagine I mean to allow any such fastness in *my* house you are very much mistaken."

(Oh, stern shades of propriety! You to be invoked at Broadhams!—and by Alice!)

"All I can say is, Pleasance, that I am thankful papa and mamma are coming to-morrow; and then they may look after you, for your conduct is really *too disgraceful*!"

"Alice, you have no right to speak in this way to me. You don't—you cannot think that it was my doing! being—being—shut up with Mr. Bracy; it was all Mrs. Jessop's trick," I entreated earnestly yet stammering. For the sense of being truly guilty of another appointment was heavy on me, if innocent of this one.

"Yes, I do!" retorted my sister with only increasing vehemence. "As Jenny Jessop said, she was sure you *wanted him*; and so she thought she would give you both a dose of it. Pray, would no other man in the house suit you to flirt with, but my friend?"

"Hush, hush, Alice—your maid is in your bedroom, and she can hear every word," I hastily whispered, looking towards an open door, horror-stricken at Alice's imprudence; and yet with my heart so suddenly lightened of its greatest fear I could have laughed. For Mrs. Jessop had not told—whatever she knew.

"I don't care! You might have taken any other man in the house, if you had only left him alone," cried Alice, with strong symptoms of coming hysterics. Then stamping her foot, as I rushed to her side with consolation and sisterly caresses:

"Oh! go away out of my sight! Go!—go out of the room!"

So I went. She never had cared much to have me with her when vexed, even in former days; declaring she could not then bear persons who were calm like me, and did not get angry too—but now what a change for the worse! I went slowly and very sadly away, feeling that this marriage had, in a few months, terribly changed our still not less beloved family beauty.

That evening I did not come downstairs till the dinner-gong sounded; shrinking from possible jokes at my expense, for no doubt Mrs. Jessop had told half the large house-party of her practical joke. But as I slipped into the drawing-room gently, Mr. Bracy, who was standing close to the door, made way for me. Then he said with an impassive face, and in an ordinary tone of voice, no one else being near: "It is all right; I have silenced her."

Next instant Sir Dudley hustled me away, asking some unimportant question with a most important face. But Clair, whom they did not suspect, lounged past me, and never even looking my way just murmured so that I caught it:

"It was not my fault to-day!—you would forgive me if you knew."

They guarded me at dinner between Lady Pawlett and my brother-in-law, who glanced at me occasionally, as if I was a monstrous specimen of fast young ladyhood that needed close watching.

Feeling sore and bitter against my natural guardians and having been sent in alone, I watched Clair furtively—whose hard-set expression made my worst fears return. Rose had told me, with sympathetic grief in her pretty face, what "a lot of money" she heard Clair had lost the night before. This was after my return that evening, when I had imparted to her the mortifying tale of my imprisonment in the tower and Alice's wrath. Dear child, we were both very young in our troubles, but to whom should sisters turn for consolation if not to each other?—and her fresh unworldliness was as water to my thirsty soul—conscious almost every one else in this house would have thought my attachment to St. Leger a sentimental folly.

After dinner, Alice said sharply to the other ladies, being evidently still much out of tune: "There is no use in going through that farce of going to the drawing-room. The men will be out directly, and I suppose some of you will be wanting your revenge; so let us go straight to the billiard-room."

Most of her friends followed her; but there was a little ante-room before the billiard-room, dedicated to newspapers, and here I stopped short. Rose, who was singularly silent and grave this wretched Sunday night, stayed beside me, whispering:

"Shall you sit here if they play cards?—then so will I."

For the first time, she seemed to consider me her

wisest guide here. Our schoolroom child had had no London season as yet, and was shocked at what she thought a violation of the day; much as she and I had dearly loved stealing away from my mother's rather pharisaical keeping of the Jewish law, to have a romp, or a ramble in the woods with Bob and the dogs. We were both silently turning over the pages of the *World*, *Truth*, *Whitehall*, and so forth, when the Pawlett girls joined us—Charlotte with some books, Amy with an uncomfortable expression.

"Is *that* what you are reading?" asked the former in a hollow voice, at which we started. Charlotte had made gigantic strides, almost past belief, in her religious fervour during the last few days; her soul vexed by the new wickedness of Broadhams.

Rose and I felt meekly ashamed of ourselves. At home our mother, certainly, went round the house every Sunday morning sweeping newspapers and all light literature into grim cupboards, of which, as of the library bookcases, she kept the keys, leaving instead copies around of the Sunday periodicals (in which we, of course, only read the moral novels). But, to-night, I felt so revengeful, unhappy, and distraught in mind, that *anything* to divert my thoughts was a boon; and by her unusually troubled, small face, Rose seemed to think so too.

"Here is 'Thomas à Kempis' for you," said Charlotte to me solemnly, "and for you, Rose, Keble's . . ."

"Never could endure poetry! The only piece I remember now, of all those my governesses taught me by the hundred, is:

You may not love a roasted fowl,
But you may love a screaming owl.

It was called 'Loving and Liking.' Thank you, Charlotte, but I'd rather sit here and think," responded Rose, shutting up her mouth into a tight little red button, and crossing her arms.

"And where may not your thoughts wander to, unless you discipline them; as, for instance, by first reading and then meditating?" pursued Charlotte still more severely, evidently ready to begin a prolonged discussion.

"Don't bother, please; for I am too tired to read, really—and besides, I won't," answered our spoilt youngest one, as if that settled the matter, adding with a roguish smile: "If you do want to preach, why not go into the next room, where your mamma and Mrs. Jessop are playing double-dummy whist to keep their hands in?"

"Rose, how can you? Charlotte, don't think of such a thing as interfering with mamma," exclaimed Amy in prescient horror, as well she might. For, on hearing this news, Charlotte started, with rather a stage thrill that seemed to run up her spine and end in a violent sniff—looked fixedly at the open door, then at Rose, as if the latter had been the unconscious agent of a divine command!—again at the door—and finally, her mind made up, went towards the latter swiftly with a working face and clenched hands, though her arms hung limply by her side.

With a little cry of horror, poor Amy darted after her; feebly trying to hold back the resolved martyr. Rose and I, meanwhile, waited for the result with appalled looks at each other. In a few seconds, we were aware of a lull in the feminine hum in the other room, through which Charlotte's voice sounded indistinctly and curiously—low and forced—

a self-frightened latter-day prophetess. *Then* I came Lady Pawlett's voice raised in passion ; with a loud jeering laugh from Mrs. Jessop. A minute afterwards our unfortunate friend reappeared, led away swiftly by Lady Pawlett ; who, whilst Amy still followed with even more despairing looks, clutched her daughter firmly by the wrist. The contrast had never been stronger between the handsome, splendidly-robed mother and the plain, skimpily-skirted daughter—for whom nature, art, and parents had done so little ; and who passed now with the resigned look of one who suffers for conscience' sake.

"It is a pity your new ideas don't teach you to honour your parents, but I suppose that is too old-fashioned !" said the mother, with the glaring eye of a virtuous Roman matron.

"They do ; and that is why I warned you in all duty and lovingness," sighed Charlotte.

"Hold your tongue, and get to your own room !" hissed Lady Pawlett at the door ; now thinking herself out of earshot and becoming instantly a very virago.

They all began gambling in the next room then, as soon as the gentlemen came in. Sir Dudley, holding a short conference with Alice in our little ante-room, did certainly offer an objection. "It seems not quite the right thing on account of these girls—eh ?"

"The girls !!" echoed Alice contemptuously. "Oh, if *they* never did worse than play cards on a Sunday evening. . . ." She glanced towards me as she spoke, curling her short upper lip as if my depths of iniquity that day had taught her more of evil ways than ever she knew before ; and soon Rose and I alone had the newspapers to ourselves.

Not quite alone, though ; for Mr. Bracy by-and-by

l lounged in from the next room with a scientific-looking review in his hand, and sat down in silence near us. He had hardly done so, however, when Sir Dudley followed close, looking as important as a guardian of public morals, and very cross at his self-imposed office.

"Don't you smoke?" he surlily asked, addressing himself to Bracy as if growling at him.

"Not yet; thanks," returned the other, perhaps from consideration for Rose and myself.

"If you do want to, don't mind the young ladies," politely continued our brother-in-law, and then began puffing like a starting steam-engine beside me, in silence.

It was very disagreeable; that is, not the smoke, though Sir Dudley tacitly insisted on sitting glued to my side; but the impression of being distrusted, and of restraint. Rose and I exchanged glances furtively, and by-and-by, as soon as we could rise without seeming offended, retired softly from the ante-room, with a murmured good-night, to our own rooms. Here—it must be owned—though with a feeling of relief at being at peace at last, I wept again a little over all the vexations of this unfortunate Sunday.

Rose pitied me, consoled, and occasionally in a most feeling way wiped her own eyes. She hated Mrs. Jessop now as cordially as I did. She would not leave me that night; but came and slept, too, in a small portion, as suited her size, of my enormous bed built for the Titans. We two felt so deserted, so lonely in that great house.

Silently, not to keep poor Rose waking longer, I grieved myself into fitful unconsciousness through the long, cold hours of that wintry night. But then bad

dreams roused me to waking trouble of mind, that could not free itself enough from shackles of sleep to do more than go round and round, in puzzled pain, thinking what Clair could mean—what others might mean!—till with pure weariness and turmoil the brain wandered back again into the broken, objectless visions of sleep.

CHAPTER XXVII.

IN the cold gray morning, a candle was flashed in our faces. We both started up, rubbing our eyes sleepily, and thinking it was still the middle of the night.

To our alarm, Alice stood shivering in her dressing-gown, with a light in one hand and a long telegram in the other.

“Do rouse up! and read this from mother,” she sharply said. “Father is ill! and can’t come to-day, it seems. They gave me such a dreadful fright just now; waking me with a message at such an unearthly hour; so, once I was up, I thought I might as well let you both know. And it’s so cold; ugh! isn’t it too bad?”

Alice crouched down upon our bed, shivering as she spoke, pulling the counterpane and what blankets she could get round her. I had already snatched the telegram, and was devouring it with confused, frightened eyes; Rose peering over my shoulder and holding the candle.

At first, it did not seem so very alarming. “Father had had a bad attack on Friday; but fearing to alarm

us, mother had delayed writing. He was not well enough to come yet. She herself had slight rheumatism, so could not nurse him properly, and had wired for Bob." "Don't wish to spoil girls' pleasure by sending for them," it ended. But—as we remained silent a few moments, except for interjections—on studying the words closer I grew more foreboding.

"A 'bad attack!' Mother never would say that unless it was *really* bad; she makes so light of *all* illness," I mused aloud.

"Yes; and fancy her allowing any one else to wait upon *him*!" ejaculated Rose by my side. For, as we all knew—upon the rare occasions of old when father had any little ache or ailment, and in the occasional tired fits he could not always successfully conceal from us since some months—mother had always been strangely jealous of any of us her children doing for him any of those little loving duties she considered her especial right. Rose added with the sapient air of a privileged child, as she was:

"And mother has had rheumatism in her arm all the winter. I know: for one day I found her rubbing it, but she said I must say nothing about it. Unless it was worse, she would never send for Bob."

"Poor mamma! Yes, she never thinks of herself; and now that *I* am gone none of you look after her. This is too hard on her; just when she was coming to me for her first visit," grumbled Alice pityingly. With Alice and Beau our mother was always the favourite parent; but then these two eldest were her swans, and Beaumanoirs.

Nevertheless, at Alice's assumption of superior filial virtue, Rose and I felt nettled; for what had she ever done more for our mother than we had? Far, far less,

indeed! Like the son in the parable, saying, "I go, sir," she—on the rare occasions when mother asked her to give a message, or any little help, instead of us—went not; though she would indeed give answer a merry "yes," sure immediately afterwards in a lazy, laughing way to bid one of us do it instead, averring—"It is all the same thing."

"Well, I'm going now. If you've nothing to say, you need not keep me here in the cold any longer," Alice now ended, crossly enough, rising as she spoke. "I do declare it is too bad. I thought we should have had a pleasant party when you two came here; and instead of that everything has gone wrong. It is enough to disgust one of having girls in the house!"

"Well—I like that! As if we were to blame for poor dear father not being well!" exclaimed Rose hotly; but I interrupted, speaking almost in the same breath.

"Hush, Rose dear. Yes, Alice, I have something to say: that is, that I will go home at once—to-day."

"Well . . . if you think you ought, of course . . . perhaps you had better—I would hardly like to stop you. But there is no such immediate hurry," answered Lady Digges, hesitatingly and more graciously; adding some few expressions of apparent unwillingness to lose my society that made me suddenly think, with a great surprised flash of insight and anger, that she, my sister, was *glad* I should leave her house! Fired at the thought, I sprang the next instant out of bed, and began hurriedly dressing myself.

"There is every need for haste," said I, trying to speak softly and not too coldly; for, after all, Alice had a right to choose her own guests. "When does the next train go, I wonder; and what o'clock is it now?"

"About eight, dear; only with the shutters closed it seems so much earlier, and it is raining hard, and such a dark morning," said Alice, creeping to peer out and drawing shivering breath. "Well, I'll send my maid to find out about your train, and order a carriage if you think you *must* go; so now I may as well go back to bed again. Tell mother I'm so dreadfully sorry; and mind you write. . . . Why, Rose, what are you dressing for?"

"I'm going too, of course."

"But of course you are doing nothing of the sort! You are under my charge here; and without mamma's permission I shall certainly not let you stir," sharply returned our elder sister.

In vain Rose protested with all her warm little heart, and even cried. Alice was inflexible; and I, being accused of selfishness when venturing interference, was silenced.

We both had to submit; knowing that indeed all the maternal authority was considered vested in Lady Digges's hands. And we were somewhat afraid of meeting our mother, even though we went home to help her, if Alice wrote this was against her wishes.

What a hurried packing it was! and what hasty consultations Rose and I held in whispers, not to be overheard by our maid! The poor child promised to write me faithfully everything that occurred in the house—of course, this entirely or almost solely referred to Clair St. Leger. And then we repeated often to each other, regretfully, but still with hopeful assurance:

"Of course father's attack *can't* be very much; oh no, of course not!—he will soon be better."

One has such a feeling in first youth that severe illness, or great trouble, may come to others, but that nothing so extraordinary can happen to *ourselves*.

"It does seem so hard of fate that you have to go now, my poor Pleasance," uttered Rose, looking at me as if such a martyr's sacrifice was unprecedented in her short experience.

"Yes ; but it must be done," I answered with a heavy heart.

Surely, surely, if Clair cared for me at all, my going home to do my duty would not make him care for me less. "Absence makes the heart grow fonder." He might be sorry, then, that he had not tried more to talk to me last night ; not that in any bitterness of my own heart I *wished* him to be sorry—but that as he had not been quite kind to me, it might reunite us.

A hurried breakfast was laid for me at a side-table in the great dining-room. One or two of the earlier guests, learning my departure, came in a really kind way to express their regret ; among these Lord Pawlett, who, shaking me quite earnestly by the hand, said he would go and tell Amy. He was sure Amy did not know ; and —ahem ! Amy was very fond of me. It was the first evidence he had ever given me of having a soul of his own or thoughts of his daughters apart from his wife. Next, Fulke Bracy hastened in to say farewell with the truest sympathy and friendly feeling both for me and father. A few hopeful, earnest words of good speed were all he said—what more could be said ?—but they so cheered and warmed my heart that I felt quite strong after them. Afterwards, when dressed for the journey, I came into the outer hall a few minutes later with Rose, I found him again waiting to see me off.

Just then Mrs. Jessop also appeared ; and, giving a little feigned start at sight of him, rather maliciously whispered :

"Poor Miss Brown !—I thought it would be so

solitary if none of us came to say good-bye, that here I am—but I hope I am not *de trop*, my dear !”

“ I don’t know what you mean,” was all I could say, looking full at her.

Oh, stupid, stupid Pleasance !—surely no presence of mind or mother wit was ever mine ; ten minutes later, too late, in the carriage, what a number of brilliant answers suggested themselves tantalisingly to my mind.

She answered with a sly smile : “ Come here aside, my dear, a moment till I say something. . . . Well, good-bye ; I *hope* your father will be better very soon—it hardly seems necessary that you should run away in this *very* sudden manner, does it ? And—one last piece of advice, if I may offer it as a friend—don’t blot *billets-doux* in future *on fresh blotting-paper* !”

She had sprung back as if afraid I should tear her to pieces ; then ran, with an affectedly girlish wave of the hand for such a buxom woman, through the doorway, before I could even utter the quick indignant exclamation that was on my tongue. Rose was at my side inquiringly in a moment. Fulke Bracy looked at us both questioningly. Whether he had guessed, or overheard, I knew not ; but anyhow he shook my hand in a specially comforting, protecting way. Next down rushed Amy, just when my foot was on the carriage-step. She threw herself on my neck literally, and wept in an ashamed, ungainly way. Poor soul ! her eyes indeed looked as if she had been crying all night, and so beginning afresh was nothing strange. Then I was off.

Putting my head out of the window to look back at the dull house, in the dull, damp park, as I was driven down the ugly drive, it seemed to me as if my time there had been like a bad dream. All the way back, it seemed to me so strange to have looked forward for long

weeks to our Broadhams visit with such happy anticipations ; and now—to go home like this !

It was perhaps well for me that the journey lasted nearly all day, for by afternoon I was dulled and stupefied to deadness ; if my state of thought and feeling could not be called by the higher name of resignation.

It was evening when the train stopped at our home station, and there was Bob's dear face grinning in greeting.

"It's all right !—the governor looks nearly as well as ever again ; and what's more, he's outside there in the carriage."

So he exclaimed, running along by the side of the train before it stopped, putting his head in at the window at the peril of his neck, and jerking his thumb over his shoulder in his usual free-and-easy style. Then when I got out :

"Oh, I say, isn't this jolly ? You and I home again, and no cramming to do for a blessed week—(week ! see if I don't make it a fortnight)—nothing to do but to coddle the dear old dad, and can't we two just do that ! Eh ? . . . Here *she* is !—Here *he* is !"

There was my father in the brougham ; welcoming me in *almost* the same hearty voice, and with just the same loving eyes, as of old. It was only after an affectionate hug, on sitting down beside him, that I noticed the dear ruddy face was paler, *grayer*, and that his grizzled head hung slightly forward a little heavily.

"Let us be off soon, dear ; for I have some important business awaiting me which obliged me to come in to-day," he said, rather nervously, as if anxious for haste, yet not wishing to spoil the kindness of our first meeting again.

"But, father, surely you are not strong enough—I wonder they allowed you . . ."

"Hush, my pet. Remember that I wanted the pleasure of coming to meet *you*, as you left your amusements to come back to the old man. Let us suppose that business had nothing to say to it . . . nothing to say to it . . . nothing!" he answered, caressing my hand, and repeating the words dreamily, which was so unusual in him I looked up; but saw that, with his eyes fixed on the houses we passed, he was evidently thinking of the business in question.

Arrived at the offices where his business agents always met him, he got out rapidly, with a nervous briskness of movement that surprised me. Indeed he never waited for Bob, who had sprung out by the other door of the carriage, and was running round to offer his shoulder as a support.

"There; do you see that!" exclaimed the March Hare, with admiring foolishness, gazing after him. "Talk of him being long ill; why, he hasn't walked as briskly as that for months. Look at the pace he's going upstairs!"

"But it's not good for him, is it?" said I, not much wiser than Bob in matters of illness, yet more doubtful. But Bob reassured me, plunging his head momentarily into the carriage for conversation as he stood outside, for closed vehicles were not greatly to his liking.

"I came home this morning—travelled all night," quoth he. "And he was very cheery on seeing me; not *quite* so lively as usual perhaps, you know. As to mother? well! she did seem a little fretted with her rheumatism, and with sitting up two or three nights with father"—which last Bob thought was over-fearfulness on her part. But she had been awfully good to him; treated him almost as if he was the gray-headed boy himself (namely Beau). It had been much against

the mother's wish that father had driven in to-day, but he had been so keen about it, she had to give way. And Bob had had time already to inspect the dogs, which were looking grand; and so forth, and so forth, in outbursts; with interpolated questions as to the jolly fun Rose and I must have had at Broadhams, hardly waiting for my answers.

Then father came out.

He was walking very slowly now—very, very slowly—leaning on the arm of an old trusted clerk in the house, who was looking rather anxiously at him, I thought. But as Bob hastened to give him his help down the steps, father paused at the top in thanks, and gently smiled at me.

"You tired yourself going upstairs so quickly without help," I exclaimed in solicitude, settling the cushions and wraps comfortably for him.

"Yes, dear—that was foolish of me . . . when I have two . . . such good young caretakers," he answered, taking breath between each pause, and then turned to sign a farewell to the old man who had helped him; not with his old hearty manner, seeming grave and tired, yet with the same thoughtfulness for inferiors that made him thank every beggar woman who blessed him for giving her a shilling.

"Don't come inside, my boy," as Bob with secret rue, but composed features, was preparing for that stuffy ordeal with his back to the horses. "Go on the box—you love fresh air; and Pleasance is enough for me."

How glad I was he said that last!—to be enough for him, was almost a full and sufficient compensation surely for all my late troubles. As if something of what was in my mind passed into his, he roused himself—after a

quarter of an hour of silence during which my thoughts, reassured for him, had strayed back to late days, whilst his dear eyes being closed I did not speak for fear of disturbing him.

"Tell me about Broadhams, my child."

So, hastily deciding in my own mind to tell nothing that might distress him, I began repeating mere pleasant outlines and the names of the guests.

"St. Leger!"—he said, stopping me, and looking in my face with a curious wistful kindness in his eyes I had never seen there before. "St. Leger; he was there—ah!"

Under that sympathetic, loving gaze, and because of something lingering and questioning in the tone, somehow—I cannot explain it better—the conscious blood told its secret in my cheeks at once; so that I turned my face to hide it and the sudden little gush of tears that suffused my eyes but must not fall. Then I found myself caressed and my hand drawn into his own and stroked, though feebly; as if he was too tired to move.

"Darling," he whispered, and as if even that was an effort, "I thought last summer that you and he—had begun to like each other. . . . Well, if Clair St. Leger will but work he is a fine young fellow . . . and I can only find it in my heart to bless whoever will make one of my children happy."

I pressed his hand back closely, only finding voice enough to murmur lovingly:

"Thank you, thank you, father dear—but you are so tired. We will talk about this again. I see your eyes closing—go to sleep if you can, now; try, at least."

What a sore pain was in my heart as I thought Clair would never, *never* work! Ah! if he but would!

My father nodded and closed wearily his heavy eyelids, his head dropping forward on his chest so

immediately that it had plainly cost him an effort to give me his attention for even those few seconds. Taking a pillow that had been put in the carriage, I propped it on my shoulder and made him lay his head down upon it ; glad to be such a tall daughter that he could rest so at his ease.

We had not gone far after this when in the growing darkness a shower lashed the carriage windows. He opened his eyes again, no doubt, though from our positions I could not see his face, as he said like one waking out of sleep :

“Call Bob in—he will get wet.”

Pulling the check-string I soon had the moist March Hare in cover beside us, his top-coat exhaling a mingled odour of stables, tobacco, and pet fox-terrier, to my imaginative but not unkindly mind.

“Ah ! now all is right,” said my father, and his head nestled more heavily again on my shoulder. From time to time as the darkness deepened I could hear his stertorous breathing, which to my satisfaction grew softer and softer.

“How nicely he is taking a rest now !” murmured Bob, and in guarded whispers we congratulated ourselves on this blessed slumber. We were now going homeward along the familiar roads, but only by the occasional flashing of the carriage-lamps on some white farm gable-wall or creepered cottage-front could I tell where we were, it was such a thick night. The rain poured continuously down in close streams, and white mist filled all the hollows and rose up to meet it.

Father slept sounder and sounder. My shoulder ached at last terribly with the strain, but I would not have stirred the thousandth part of an inch for worlds !—for *anything* !

"Ain't you tired? I should think so. Cheer up, it will soon be over," murmured Bob, bending forward encouragingly, his breath tickling my ear.

Now we turned in at the lodge-gate. The horses' hoofs went *plop! plop!* with quite renewed vigour up the wet drive. The bare branches of the trees, hazily illumined before us, appeared to bend and overlace each other in welcoming gray arches. "Home again!" they seemed to say. "Loving hearts here, Pleasance! Whatever your troubles and sorrow and love, other love will help you to bear it. We are all so sorry for you; we have known you since childhood; cheer up! cheer up!" As the horses mounted the last hill and turned round on the gravelled sweep, still all the well-known, if hidden objects in the darkness around seemed to echo,—*"cheer up!"*

Out flashed a light from the opening door, as our wheels were heard by watchful ears. Out came mother; her graceful figure shown in dark relief in the doorway, against the strong light in the hall behind.

"At last!" she called anxiously, as we drew up with a crunch of the wheels. "How is your father?"

"Well! well—couldn't be better," called back Bob cheerily. "He has been sleeping here on Pleasance's shoulder all the way back; and we have been watching him."

"How are you, William?" repeated my mother with a tender inflection of her voice; as unheeding her rheumatism and the pouring rain, she came outside to the carriage-door.

But my father did not answer.

"Wake up, father, now; you are at home, dear," I said in his ear, and took his listless hand in mine that gave no response; so turning I said apologetically to

mother: "He *is* so fast asleep; how shall I rouse him?" With a stifled little exclamation, whether of impatience or fear I hardly knew, my mother snatched a light from one of the footmen behind, who held it to show our invalid the carriage-steps. Turning it full on the still sleeping face, she looked a moment, then gave a cry that rings through my ears even now after years!

"*He is dead!*"—she cried. "You have both let him die; and I was not with him!"

As she spoke, she staggered backwards, catching hold of the side of the porch to support herself.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

It was nearly midnight. The old family doctor who had been sent for in wild haste through the darkness, though we knew it was of *no use!* had arrived. Out with him came the trusty old clerk, on whose arm *he* had last been slowly supported down the office-steps.

How the ill news had so flown was a marvel, as always in these cases, but to the sorrowing it all seems so natural! It seems as if the whole world ought to know our great loss, too; and feel that one has gone from us, the like of whom we shall never, never see again.

I was lying prone on a sofa in the deserted drawing-room, which was almost in darkness but for the flickering fire-light. Crushed, crushed—as if not able to stir a finger, or think one thought. That was how I lay moaning in a soundless murmur to myself sometimes, or

weakly clenching my fingers as if longing for bodily pain to ease this intolerable anguish of a sudden awful void and blank in life. Then came voices near. There had been many heretofore which seemed whispering and murmuring outside in the awed confusion of the house ; but I had never heeded. These came from the saloon, the door of which stood open.

"Don't blame yourself, Mr. Bob—it was this crash that broke his heart. Nothing you could have done would have saved him," the old doctor's voice was saying.

I raised my head at that, with a sudden start as the words thrilled through me ; next moment I was behind them in the other room. "What crash ?—what broke his heart ?"

The three men, who stood with their backs to me, all turned, startled.

"Oh, deary, deary me, Miss Pleasance—I almost took you for a ghost, with your white face coming out of the darkness," said the old clerk pityingly and as if to gain time ; the most loquacious of the three, like those in the lower ranks of life. Bob simply looked at me, not able, poor fellow ! to speak.

"*What is it ?—Oh do tell me, some one !*" I asked again, beseechingly turning imploring eyes upon them all ; and last on the old doctor. He laid his hand kindly on my shoulder.

"My dear child, it is perhaps better you should know the cause of your good father's death, which was most peaceful and painless, as you saw. He had heard—ahem !" (the doctor cleared his throat, and he who had announced in his time so many deaths to sorrowing mourners, was plainly unusually troubled)—"he heard some bad business news to-day ; the fear of which had brought on his late attack ; and so . . ."

"He heard we were ruined! what does *that* matter now?" said Bob, bluntly and hoarsely; and sitting down by a table near, he bowed his fair young head down on his crossed arms. I looked round blankly at the others, but more in inquiry than moved by the intelligence.

"Is it true? What does he mean?"

The doctor looked at our old clerk. It was his turn now. He stared on the ground, and shuffled his feet uneasily. "Well, I'm afraid it *is* true. It's what often enough happens, and many a man will make a second fortune after it—but this time——" His voice failed him huskily; for this time the stout, patient heart we all loved so well would never more work to wipe off the unmerited disgrace.

"There might be something saved out of the fire yet," he murmured. "But Mr. Beau is away yachting in the Mediterranean, worse luck!—not that *he* would be much help, indeed" (this last in an involuntary soliloquy).

"How is your mother?" quickly asked the doctor. He wished to divert my stricken mind from this second dreadful calamity, no doubt, seeing I stood tearless, pale, cold, and stock-still. (As if one thought of mere money was in my mind at such an awful time! There was no room there for consciousness of aught beyond the dear, still form motionless upstairs.)

"She will not see me. She would not allow me to go into her room. Only her old maid, *you* know—is with her," I said in a wail; feeling rather than knowing the awful unspoken charge of neglect against me in the mind of my only parent left alive.

"She is better so, my dear," said the old man kindly. He knew us all so well, and had seen behind the scenes in our household as in so many others. "Hers is not a

nature that can bear much sympathy in suffering. You must let her grieve it out alone ; though it seems hard."

"Lord help them all ! But we will try to get all we can for the widow and the orphans," uttered the aged clerk. And somehow at those words—making me feel for the first time *what we now were* !—the icy barrier of my tears was melted, and my sorrow streamed down like rain. As I hurried away, the two old men stared after me aghast ; but poor Bob, his honest heart unable to endure the sight, was sobbing, too, like a big child.

When Rose came home next day (to the home we already knew would soon be ours no longer !) we clung closely to each other for a few speechless moments.

"Oh, Rose !" I asked, "what did *he* say ? Was he very sorry for me ?"

"I suppose he was," answered Rose very slowly ; "he told me to say to you that he would write."

"He did ! Then it is all right. He does care really for me ! I knew his good heart would assert itself—and that if he ever felt for me it would be now, when I need it so sorely," I cried, feverishly excited.

Rose said nothing.

Bob and I, in the first dreadful days, had to make all the agonising decisions about *the funeral* ; terrible, hourly questions that would not let us mourn in peace. Some Frenchman has said, he would like when dying just to take off his hat with an unexpected adieu, turn the corner of the street, and so vanish. How it would spare those left the details which *must* be cared for by some one !—of our pompous funeral ceremonies, all of which seem so to vulgarise our sacred grief ! For the first time in her life, our mother had broken down—and that all the more utterly. The stricken wife seemed only to

feel first that my father was *dead*; next that Beau, her idolised son, was fortuneless, almost homeless—that no new-founded and prosperous county family would ever now be established in the dear old West-country of her forefathers, through him !

But Bob and I were two bewildered young souls. Old heads seemed now suddenly expected on our shoulders, for even questions on the business were submitted to us, into which we plunged with the recklessness of ignorance. Poor Bob insisted always on asking my advice, deferring to it in a way that frightened me, and saying himself with tears in his eyes :

“What does it matter what we decide on? We might as well chuck it all up, or toss for it ! We’re so ruined, you know, that it can’t make any difference to us ; and thank God, it makes none to *him* now !”

If, by working with muscles and sinews till he dropped, Bob could have helped matters, he would have died for the rest of us ; but his brains were of far less use than his biceps. I, however, felt I must try to choose the lesser between the two evils so constantly brought before my faint and heart-sickened mind.

Then Aunt Bee came, to our intense relief. The old lady took all at once into her vigorous management, bidding us “poor children” rest. She seemed to have flown to our aid on wings of the wind ; and how she did it we never knew, for she was in Spain when our news reached her. “And so your fine brother-in-law, Sir Dudley, could not come to help you !” she said with a significant sound, like a snort.

“He said it would all distress Alice so much, he would rather not leave her ; but, he will come to the funeral,” answered Rose, in an ashamed tone, as having been last at Broadhams.

"Thank him for nothing!" returned Aunt Bee in bitterness of scorn, but wiping her eyes.

Then came my letter from Clair St. Leger. Even as I tore it open, an ashamed thought darted arrowlike through my brain accusing me of forgetting, in my living love, the dear spirit whose cold remains lay stilly upstairs. But then my father would have understood; he always did. No one was more nobly thoughtful, asking no extremes of us.

So the scruple quieted, my eyes devoured the small-written, clear lines, hastily turning the page to see how much there was before even getting the sense—Only two sides of a sheet! As I ended, then re-read it again slowly—feeling my whole momentarily joyful being changing, chilling, my features beginning to quiver—Rose, who was watching me, could bear her sympathy of suspense no longer, and cried out, "What does he say? Do tell me, dear Pleasance."

"Oh, Rose," I just managed to answer before breaking down into bitter crying, "it is just a letter of condolence, and—only polite!"

Rose tried to comfort me with all the love a sister knows how to give, but she could *say* nothing. There was nothing to be said. At last, I raised my tear-stained face of hers and asked beseechingly:

"Did you hear anything more about him and Mrs. Jessop? If you did, do tell me now, Rose; I would rather know the worst."

Rose, poor child! answered unwilling and slow.

"Well; I suppose it is better to say everything. She told Amy Pawlett the day you left, that you and she were pulling caps for Clair St. Leger (you know she is often so vulgar); and that she was sure to win because she had the money. Besides, she knew on Alice's

authority that you had given up your fortune to pay Beau's debts. She laughed, as she said to Amy how crestfallen Mr. St. Leger had looked on that Sunday afternoon, when she took occasion to tell him what a sentimental little goose you had been."

I gazed at Rose open-eyed, almost open-mouthed. "She said that!—how could she? It is just as well—oh, just as well he should know it! But how could one woman act so to another, as she did to me on that Sunday?"

"She is wicked; that is it. And we never met a wicked woman in our lives before," averred Rose.

That whole night I never slept, but sat up till the gray, late, winter dawn came. My thoughts were dreadful to me, either sick and sorry companions, or else like the tormentings of evil spirits; but I dared not go to bed, knowing I was too miserable to sleep, and that with the body lying in enforced quiet, the mind would have broken loose in all the more maddened wildness of working. Weak ravings, questions succeeded themselves in my brain, over and over and over again.

"*When* did he change?—extraordinary, fickle! Oh, how much kinder if he had never admired me, spoken to me—ah, yes!"

There was no faith left in me in human kind; in friends, except my own few people; and but little in God—though that I prayed and struggled so hard to hold through those small, chill hours of the night. My old father, so good, so religious! to die ruined and heart-broken, after all!

Then Clair! My life seemed a waste, a desert, because I could *never* love any one again—never know the old full trust. "Oh, my father!" I thought, and then the tears came down so fast and salt I was sick

with weeping. What would he have said, had he known I should suffer this! How little had his dear, dying blessing on the man I loved been deserved!

The morning sun rose late through the faint east, like a red fireball over the wintry woods, and the lawns that were all white with hoar-frost. It saw me kneeling in the room of death, with my head bowed over the great oak coffin, my tears bedewing the insensible wood and silver mountings beneath which lay the dear head I had so loved. Even this consolation would be gone in a few hours. It was the day of my father's funeral.

All that night, though so young and so tired, I never once closed my heavy eyes in sleep—sorrow still fought too hard with fatigue. Then at dawn, unable to bear the strain longer, I started up from my seat, drew a wrapper round me, and crept downstairs.

Kneeling there now, I knew the truth; letting myself be blinded with self-deception no longer. My youth was a blank, my love had been wasted, my hope and gladness of life was a dead thing. I had lost father, lover, fortune, all . . .!

Then I must have fainted and lain cold and outstretched on the floor.

An hour or so later, when I returned to consciousness, my mother's arms were round me, and her tears—oh, blessed tears of love!—were wet on my cheek. After a long cruel night-vigil, spent like mine in loneliness of sorrow, she too had stolen down to stand by her dear dead once more—in grief all the keener that her nature was so proudly reticent, and even if longing for sympathy seemed to repel it. "Poor Pleasance! My child . . . my child!" she was repeating. "I have been selfish—I forgot, in my own misery, how much you loved him too."

"Ah, mother dear, you are very good to me," I sobbed, my brain unstrung and hardly conscious of what I was saying; "but he cared far more for me than you do."

"It will be different now. We shall be more to each other in future," murmured my mother, low and broken. And so indeed we drew together.

CHAPTER XXIX.

ONLY a little month, barely more than one month and some short days had passed, and once more I was at Broadhams.

How in times of death and great trouble, changes that in happier days would be momentous events to us, come often so thick and fast they seem but little things! Even so my last days at Stoke—at home!—may be hurried over in description. My poor mother's first wish seemed to be only to leave all we had to our creditors in the ruin that had befallen us; next to hurry away from the place which reminded her so agonisingly of the whole happiness of her life. She would have gone the day after the funeral, I believe, if she could. Her nature was not one like mine, to cherish and brood over every little object and memory associated with her beloved dead; but rather to fly from the dear scenes; to put away from her sight *anything* that by recollection increased the almost unendurable pain she kept so proudly to herself. To me, it was hard to understand.

But, womanlike, my poor mother learnt to resign herself; perforce she stayed on at Stoke for some weeks, daily seeing all the little home-treasures, which my father and she had collected with such delight, going to the auctioneer—to the four winds, it seemed!

It was Beau's wish: that was enough. He had hurried away as soon as ever he decently could, declaring the sight of packing and bustle was too "horrid a worry." He went off to town—on business he said—and thence to Broadhams; we, as women, stayed to do his work which he disliked.

Even my mother must have thought her idolised eldest-born was selfish in shirking his duties; for she said to me in a pitiful, apologising manner, quite new to her:

"His feelings are too much for him, Pleasance. I *know* that is why he cannot bear to stay! Think of how much harder it is for him to leave his own house, than for all of us—my poor boy!"

And I said nothing. Harder for Beau than for *us*?—for Rose and Bob and me, who each in degree loved more and more intensely every stick and stone and tree in our beautiful home in the west!

"It's a beastly shame!" said Bob, nearly sobbing, as he hammered and packed with a neatness and handiness never expected of him. "Beau never cared!—he always used to like going on his fine visits better than coming home in vacation time; and, last summer, he said it was too slow a hole for him to stay in."

As for me, the words of a still living American writer came home to me; as his laughing yet deep and tender thoughts have done to so many more hearts: "A house is never a house until we have crusted it with the spoils of a hundred lives besides those of our own past;" and

on leaving home he finds to his own surprise how many roots he had struck therein, unknown to himself, each of which, at the last wrench, seemed to shriek aloud like those of the fabled mandrake. If Holmes felt this, being a man, how much more might I, a woman!—we who send out so many tender fibres and tendrils; clinging unreasoningly perhaps, but because of our nature, to all the objects around us among which God has ordered our lives to be mostly passed.

Such a home as it was, too! If the Bracys had truly been no ancestors of mine, yet they themselves could hardly have cherished the legends and memories of their grand old family and Saxon hall more reverently than did I in heart. Their past seemed, by virtue of my love and admiration, to have been knit to my young life. Ah! would those who came after us, feel for Stoke as I had felt?

And so Broadhams now received my mother, Beau, and myself. (Rose was with Aunt Bee for a little while at the Barn; and Bob was to make his home there.)

It was a change indeed from the last visit, although I had always found that great ugly house so dull. Now we lived in a few small rooms, in Alice's boudoir, and Sir Dudley's study. The great reception-rooms were daily opened and warmed by the housekeeper's directions, but Alice with a shudder turned from the doors: "They are dreadful without a large party! as quiet as the grave," she exclaimed.

Quiet as the grave! It seemed to me—going heavily through the marble inner hall, where only my own footsteps now made resounding echoes, and no laughing blue eyes would greet mine in the round gallery above any more—that thus it should be! here and wherever was one of his dear ones to mourn our dead. As we

three women trailed our black dresses over the inlaid floors, or met each other wandering solitary in the lone red corridors, the silence and even deathly stillness of the great house was rest and soothing to my sore spirit.

So it was also to my poor mother. Here, though we were almost beggars, no sight or sound of poverty suggested our future lot. Alice, her darling, was here in a safe harbour where none of our late ills would ever surely threaten her to the end of life; was idolised, *rich . . . !*

"It is my one great comfort, now, to see her so happy!" murmured my mother to me one evening, after we had been there two or three days. We stood in the boudoir, where, inside, clear firelight sparkled on the many pretty *objets de luxe* lavished around. Outside, the trees of the flat park to westward darkened almost grandly in their heavy masses against a dull red band of sky, where the sun had set. "Yes: it is a *blessing* indeed to feel that I have done so well, at least, for *her*," she went on, thinking aloud unconsciously. My mother's ways were strangely changed now in such small matters; also looking up I saw tears standing in her still beautiful eyes. "Who knows, too, but that you and Rose may be just as fortunate; and all through this, my dear? For, though *I* can do so little for either of you now, Alice will take one or both of you out next year in London, of course. . ."

Her voice died away in musing. Mine was silent.

What use to cry out to her, with impulsive affection, flinging my arms around her neck—as I would have done with the other dear dead parent, who was no longer by to understand all my ways and thoughts!

"Don't speak of London. Oh, don't think of all that—I would far, far rather stay with you."

Yes! we had drawn together, my mother and I,

since the one supreme hour of our mutual great sorrow. But still it takes a far longer time to bring about that perfect understanding, that mutual giving and taking of opinion and wishes which is the basis of the best affection, even though the superior intellect must always lead. It may be engendered by years of affectionate life together, as between my father and myself; or it may be lit, as it were in an instant, between two souls who have only just met.

And so my mother now looked on me fully as her child, perhaps for the first time in my life, not as a Brown merely but as a Beaumanoir also; therefore her mind at once turned to governing my life for me—to shaping my fortune so far as now in her lay. So she had done with Alice, so had thought to do with little Rose. All the caprices of her idolised Beau were adopted as her own ardent wishes. His changing fancies hitherto, now for a seat in Parliament, now for diplomacy, art, music, were the secret ambitions of her life. But as to me—having been my father's child, he had let me grow up beside him as might a flower, to which he gave love and care, but to which God would send from heaven the sun and rain and perhaps storm as best pleased Him in its future life. Poor mother! Poor Pleasance! How I longed that she would only be content to do the same by me; but dared not tell her so.

Sir Dudley was very kind to us all the time we stayed at Broadhams, certainly—in his own way.

He was moved by seeing his worshipped Alice hanging round my mother's neck the first evening we came, caressing and pitying her. With all his heaviness of mind he had a good heart, and his impressions were very slow to change. Therefore he and Beau went out together morning after morning, shooting, or passing

their time round the farm or home-stables ; while in the afternoons he would take out Alice for a walk or a drive. A fortnight had nearly passed : and yet he never showed by word or look that *he* wearied of the quiet enforced on his household by the presence of the widow and the fatherless under his roof. Perhaps he was glad to have Alice so entirely to himself, almost for the first time since they were married.

But after a very few days, Alice's pretty attentions to my mother began to wane and cease.

It struck me daily more how my sister grew quite dismal—just as we, whom she had met with almost smiling consolations, began to feel reasonably cheered by this grateful rest after all our terrible late bustle and grief. She was like a caged bright bird ; and several times exclaimed to me privately, while looking at her slender, dark figure in one of the many mirrors around us in the magnificently dreary rooms :

“How I hate black ! It never became my complexion—we might as well be two nuns here, I declare, with my poor mother for abbess.”

This little outburst of impatience surprised me slightly. But I was startled when, a day later, Alice declared with sudden vehemence as we were alone together :

“Rain again ! It seems always raining here since you came ; or if it is fine there is nothing to do but drive with Dudley in the pony-carriage. If it was not for mother and you, we should be off to Cannes and get some sunshine ! . . . Oh, of course I would not be unkind for worlds——” (I had only looked up at her, too much taken aback to speak.) “I'm sure, ever since my marriage I have always been doing my best for you all ; but one has to make such sacrifices *always* to one's family.”

"I am certain, Alice, that if mother only guessed you wished to go abroad, she would not like to delay you by our stay here. For myself, I should be dreadfully sorry to keep you on our account—even for a day."

My lips trembled a little and tears stood in my eyes. Ridiculous!—but then her *tone*, more than the mere words, had cut me to the quick. So lightly careless of our poverty and troubles; so heartless as to her own due share of grief! She might have been an utter alien, instead of our adored beauty, our family pride.

"There! you fly off in a temper at once, Pleasance. I wish you combined a little more sense with your sensitiveness. You have so many fine feelings that, as Jenny Jessop once said, she was sure I never could help hurting *some* of them," retorted Alice flippantly; apparently half-consolated for her ill-humour by her own smartness of speech, and the sense of having roused me to see her wrongs.

"What is the matter, do you say, Dudley?" as her spouse, in his shooting-coat, came heavily in at that moment, and looked at us both in some slow wonder. "Why, only that Pleasance here is in a passion at my merely saying if it was not for our duties to them I should be off enjoying myself at Nice—which is perfectly true! . . . What—play chess with you, as it is a wet day? My dear old man, you must be perfectly MAD! I drive with you when it's fine, and try to play billiards with you in the evening; but, for heaven's sake don't ask me to become a still more exemplary wife!"

"It was only to please *you* I thought of it; as you say you are bored to death lately, and hate reading," returned poor Sir Dudley, on the defensive. For, to do him justice, he would have far more willingly snored and smoked in his own den all the afternoon; and also at

nights he suffered slow martyrdom from Alice's determination not to leave himself and Beau the sole enjoyment of the billiard-table, while she was so impatient as to be a far more miserable player than even I in my mediocrity.

"Well, any way, I positively won't do anything now; unless I make Julie pull out all my dresses, to see if they are worth keeping till after—or else I'll curl myself up in the boudoir and go to sleep," yawned Alice, affecting a little mock-defiant laugh, and she betook herself off therewith.

Sir Dudley looked after her admiringly, then turning to me, meaning to be kind—though plainly his best sympathies had gone out of the door.

"Come, Pleasance, don't be vexed. 'Pon my honour, we are both only too glad to have you all here; but it *is* hard on Alice, poor girl! Just when she was expecting to enjoy herself in town, don't you see?"

"Exactly so. It was a pity my father did not wait to die till after the London season," said I, low, but with razor keenness in my bitterness of spirit. Sir Dudley stared at me rather puzzled, but answered piously with a reproving air:

"Well—these things are all in the hands of Providence."

When he left the room, my first thought was anger that I had not made him *feel* more! The next came remorse that I, who had never said bitter things before in my life, should be only sorry that my woman's play of tongue was too rapier-like for Sir Dudley even to *see* the attack. Some people only understand words like bludgeons.

Then, I remember so well how my thought strayed from the memory of my dear father to that only other

person (besides my old friend Mr. Bracy) who had ever seemed to understand me thoroughly. Seemed! Had it been mere seeming? Surely, surely, for however short a time, he had loved me! Each day since we came, I had meant to ask Alice after Clair St. Leger; but always my courage failed me.

This very evening—Why should it have been this very evening? . . . why must troubles always come together? This very evening, as we were gathered together about five o'clock in that little ante-room where I had spent such a miserable Sunday night, in came Beau with some letters for himself brought by the afternoon post.

"I say—here are two offers already for Stoke. The old place will not be long in the market," he said. I looked up in agitation.

"Oh, Beau, who wants to—to have Stoke? May I see?"—Beau eyed me with languid surprise. Plainly, abhorring any prospect of business worries as he did, my eagerness was highly displeasing to him. He ejaculated:

"Presently—pray do not worry, Pleasance. I hate interference. Mother . . . Alice . . . will *you* read these?"

Humiliated, my trembling fingers took up a copy of the *World* a fortnight old; and I turned its pages hardly knowing what I read. Suddenly the name "Clair St. Leger" caught my eye with startling distinctness. A paragraph stated: "We understand that a marriage is rumoured as likely to take place soon between Mr. Clair St. Leger and Mrs. Jessop, widow of the late Josiah Jessop, Esq." There followed a short tribute to the charms of my rival's person and mind, combined with her large dower of fortune.

Curiously, before my eyesight had caught more than the one striking name, I seemed to guess all that followed. Remaining very quiet, without the smallest feeling of emotion beyond long-held breath, I read it over and over again, my eyes seeming glued to the page. Nothing reached my ears of what the rest were saying—although they were talking with animation (and, as I afterwards heard, about the offers for Stoke); but I rose and slipped away to my room.

There, would even my rival, would any woman with a living heart in her, have been able to rejoice during that hour, could she have guessed at its bitterness to me? Not that I was sorry—I would have been really *glad* to have it settled, at last; to know that the worst misery, uncertainty, was over! *If only they would both be quick and end it!* . . .

Even here, at Broadhams, the power of association had revived in my heart some faint hopes, or rather thoughts; as spring flowers will sometimes put out a few mistaken blossoms in autumn.

Oh, Clair! Clair! it may be best for us two to part, I thought; but was it well done in the doing? A letter—a few words of regret—and the links that had bound us would have been severed so much more easily, almost without pain. Well, the one would have been my woman's way: the other, no doubt, was that of a man.

That evening, after dinner, I asked Alice with an easy air of carelessness, whilst standing by the fire with my back to her:

"What is this about Mrs. Jessop and her marriage in the *World*? You never told me any news about it."

"What nonsense you do talk, Pleasance!" she returned. "You must have heard me talking of it ever so often to Beau and mother since you came." (Never

once !) "All I know is, Jenny wrote to me last week, declaring she did not know how such a thing had got into the papers ; it was too unkind, and I was to tell every one so ! . . . Pretty innocent ! I dare say she put it in herself. She is quite capable of it—I'll answer for that. Heigh-ho !—well, I did my best for them both when they were here. Clair would never have *really* suited—well, any one who had not money." Alice's voice softened a little at the last words. Did she guess anything ? If so, after that slight sign of sympathy, no other word ever more passed between us two on the subject.

CHAPTER XXX.

Two days later, rather early, as I sat alone in the morning-room, a visitor was announced. I did not catch the name, so next moment my work fell from my hands with surprise ; for instead of one of the neighbouring squires come over to see Sir Dudley about foxes or poachers, there entered—here, so far from London, or the dear west country, far even from a railroad station—none other than Fulke Bracy.

"I am so glad to meet you again," he said, coming forward with the same firm, upright bearing and kindly face I knew so well. "But I cannot say how sorry I was for you when . . ."

His hand had closed on mine while he spoke. There it stayed as our eyes met, and so for how long a space of time perhaps neither of us knew—we stood silently

looking at each other. It was very strange to me afterwards, thinking over it. The only explanation I could give to myself being that we *understood* each other; and that in the meeting of our eyes and clasp of our hands, all that Fulke Bracy could say of sorrow or sympathy for my father's death, and all our troubles, was expressed more fully than even in words; and was accepted and answered by me in a like spirit of reverent, hushed sorrow and with touched gratitude.

When next my friend spoke, it was to say:

"But the person I have really come to see here is your eldest brother, although I thought and hoped you might be at Broadhams, too. I have some business with him—may I tell you what it is?"

What he told me was, even in my sorrow, such a gladdening idea, like a glinting of sunlight through a dark rain-shower, that though I gave a little sob it was with a cry of delight.

Then he went away; following a footman who came to say Mr. Beaumanoir Brown was outside in the pleasure-grounds with Sir Dudley. He whispered, as he wrung my hand in farewell, evidently with inner excitement: "Don't say to any one, please, that I spoke to you first on this subject."

He had hardly gone before Alice came flying in, followed very gravely by her mother.

"Pleasance, be quick! What has he come for—to stay? Oh, we must make him stay; how delightful! The house won't be like a convent-cell any longer."

"To stay!—*now*, in a time of such deep mourning!" echoed my mother, very low, in deep emotion. This was evidently why she had followed Alice; for, even putting aside her own great grief that shrank from the sight of strangers, her mind was so imbued with the now some-

what old-fashioned ideas of a long mourning in utter seclusion respectfully due to the memory of the dead, that it was sacrilege in her eyes to violate the least of these rules in even the least degree.

But, just because she *could* not speak louder at that moment, Alice either heard not or heeded not.

"What has he come for, I say? To see Beau on business? . . . But what is it about?"

"That I don't—that I really cannot tell you," I replied.

"Very odd. And how long is it since he came?"

"About ten minutes—or a quarter of an hour. Really, I hardly know," I answered, blushing guiltily, as my conscious eyes sought the clock and saw the latter part of my assertion confirmed.

Lady Digges stamped her little high-heeled shoe on the ground. "And you dare to tell me that you kept my visitor, in my own house, to yourself all this time—and never sent to let me know!" she cried; then pale with passion went on breathless and witheringly: "But I might have expected as much, after your disgraceful behaviour before with him here; trying to entrap him into clandestine meetings *he* never made. Pray be quiet—cease your excuses!"—as utterly confounded, and feeling, indeed, somewhat to blame, I began stammering apologies and explanations.

"*Where* is he now? That is all I ask you."

"Outside, in the grounds somewhere near, with Beau and Sir Dudley, I believe."

"Thank you. That is all I want to know from you. If you had been a stranger, instead of my sister, you would never have dared so to presume upon my good nature. But I am utterly sick of girls and their ways. Please goodness, I'll have nothing more to do with any

of you henceforth! It is only with married women that one can have any fun, in peace, without being worried."

She went out of the room in a light whirlwind of eagerness and anger. Left alone together, my mother looked at me rather aghast, not comprehending it all.

"What is the matter, Pleasance? I must insist on an explanation."

I felt a "vast disposition" to weep, but refrained. What could I say? . . .

There was nothing to be explained. "Only Alice was always unkind to me about Mr. Bracy if ever he talked to me, or walked with me, or—we did anything together. . . . She called him her friend. She liked him to be always with herself."

My mother's face grew severe.

"Pleasance! you forget yourself. It is going too far, even in your anger, to suppose that Alice, *my daughter*, and a married woman, could prefer the society of any gentleman to that of her own husband."

A married woman! Almost the same tone in which Alice had assumed infallibility for those in that state. It struck me so bitterly that I laughed in my own heart; wondering whether the fact of a plain gold hoop-ring and vows made heedlessly at the altar, and uncared for since, could alter and exalt a woman's nature suddenly so much above that of her former mere spinsterhood.

But I was sorry for my mother, too. She had now no ambition more for herself in life; had centred all that remained in her children. It *was* hard to see her secret hopes so dashed that Alice would undertake the charge of Rose or myself in future.

Some quiet tears did rise now; for the late scene had pained me very much, and I thought my mother would not notice them.

But she said softly in a broken voice : " Pray don't my dear—I have never seen *you* cry before but once ! Alice was too hasty with you, certainly, but it distresses me to see you so unhappy. You used to seem always so contented and cheerful, as your father said—though you were often too quiet even then, I thought. We all seem changed."

We were so, indeed. My mother had never hitherto in mortal sight laid aside her gentle armour of calm self-control, sometimes icy in its exquisite perfection. I had never let her see the depths of my nature for woe ; the nature she thought so serenely commonplace, so happily Brown. And again she had never seen any fault before in Alice, whose light, fickle moods, now tears, now laughter, had all been Beaumanoir qualities.

Presently the latter came hurriedly in, wrapped in a fur cloak and wearing one of Beau's hats in which she looked very pretty. Just then, by assuming brightness, I had again consoled my mother.

" I can't find them anywhere, though I snatched up these things in the hall and ran out as quick as I could," she exclaimed disconsolately. Next moment, as a figure came along the broad terrace outside the windows : " Why—there is Beau, I declare."

At her eager call, the said individual nonchalantly stepped through the window which she hastily opened for him. " Make haste, Beau, do ! You are so slow, and ugh, the outside air is so cold !"

" *You* seem in somewhat of a hurry," blandly replied our elder brother. " What may your Ladyship be pleased to want with me ?"

" Where is Mr. Bracy gone ?—and what *was* his business with you ?"

" He is gone either to the devil, or to see Sir Dudley.

I beg your pardon, my dear Alice, for seeming to assume any comparison between the two personages," drawled Beau; then his face hardened curiously, and his voice took a sarcastic ring. "As to his business with me, it has not prospered, I am—happy to state. It was nothing less, deuce take the fellow's impudence! than that he wanted to *buy back Stoke!*"

"And what did you say?" ejaculated Alice, amazed.

"I said, I'd be d—d if he did!" responded our handsome elder brother, with quite a savage look of anger, languid though he generally was in temper.

An outcry came from all three of us.

"Beau! how could you be so unkind?" from Alice and myself. And, "Beau!—I am glad you refused him!" from my mother.

We women turned and all looked at each other, then flushed—for even my mother's pale cheeks had taken a softly pink tinge, breathless with the warm thought in our hearts at a question that involved the fate of our dear house in the West.

Alice burst out in hot ejaculations of her own friendship for Mr. Bracy, and Beau's brotherly ingratitude to herself, incoherently expressed. Plainly the question was purely personal with her; she wished to please Fulke that he might be the more pleased with herself. To me, it seemed almost as if Stoke was a living portion of earth that was being cruelly withheld from one who had long loved it, as had his ancestors who had been reared on its broad acres. Mother's flash of bitterness had been the mere maternal instinct of sharing her son's feelings entirely; divining that the thought of having to give up his beautiful home and position as a country gentleman to the very man whose family *we* had supplanted, was gall to him.

She had guessed him rightly, though quietly folding her hands she did not say another word ; as if reminding herself that Beau was now the owner, the family representative (surely embodying to her that of Beaumanoir rather than our broken Brown stem); and as she had always blindly worshipped the future heir in her eldest-born, so now she was prepared to accept his will as her law.

But disregarding Alice's angry expostulations and questions showered upon him, likewise my lower but far more earnest pleadings and soft persuasions, Beau turned on his heel with a gesture as if he shook us from him : " I tell you both again—and once for all !—that I never liked your dear friend, Mr. Bracy ; and rather than have him in my shoes, I would sell Stoke for five thousand less to this retired Jew tailor who wrote to me yesterday. What do I care about the mere money ?"—magnificently. " However, we are really exciting ourselves most unnecessarily"—his drawl denoted very little excitement—"for after Mrs. Jessop's letter to me yesterday, I shall promise to let her have the first chance of Stoke. Wants it on her marriage with Clair, very likely."

"*Mrs. Jessop* ! You would not surely rather sell our old home to her, instead of to the man whose forefathers owned it and loved it and lived on it since the old Saxon days!" I uttered, my eyes blazing, and feeling the wish to burn each word in my indignation and anger into his memory.

"Certainly !—Do pray, my dear Pleasance, oblige me by no more words on this unpleasant subject, if you are to make your home with me henceforth." Therewith Beau left the room with the most bland superior air imaginable ; stopping to deliver a Parthian shaft at the door with a wickedly easy smile. "By the way, Alice,

what a lady-killer your friend seems to be!—Pleasance seems dangerously smitten in that quarter, eh?”

Not heeding his careless taunt, I hastily left the room, hurrying away from them all, with only a blind feeling that I must be alone. Down a long ground-floor corridor was the chapel, once used for weekly services in former days, now I believed never visited by any one save myself, who since coming this last time to Broadhams had found out and learnt to love this retreat.

Here, alone, and safe from all likely intrusion, I sank down on a pile of hassocks and covered my face.

Mrs. Jessop—perhaps Clair St. Leger's *wife*—that odious woman at dear Stoke! It seemed all too much to bear—too much!

CHAPTER XXXI.

It was so still and peaceful in the little chapel. The storied panes of the stained windows high overhead, illumined with glowing colour and rich with tracery, suggested thoughts of beauty and holiness, far different from the dull view of the Broadhams demesne outside. It was a fit home of purposeless lives spent therein in fat content.

I may have sat there half-an-hour, perfectly still now, after the first upheavings of bitter emotion and disappointment had subsided. The sacred associations of the place had stolen into my being and brought peace there.

To this last coming trial, as to those now past, I once more said: “What is the use of fretting or raving against

the fates, the circumstances, that press down like great forces shaping our lives against our desires? Only be still, be resigned! The weight of the burden is already lightened by half, once it is no longer struggled under. . . With men this may be more difficult. Thank God, that women, whose task is to suffer more and silently in this world, have the larger share of resignation given to their natures."

Presently a low sigh from out of the stillness fell on my ear. I was hidden from sight behind a lectern, which was also piled with coverings against possible dust; for who ever came here to pray now but myself, and that unknown?

Another sigh—a murmured word or two as if of intercession. I started! . . . It was my mother, kneeling a little way from me on a *prie-dieu* chair.

At the slight rustle I made in rising to look, she raised her head and met my startled eyes. Then, after a moment or two of stillness and perhaps resumed self-control, she made me a sign. I stole to her side as if the place wherein we were was verily sacred ground to us both, and that not in unmeaning words.

For a while my mother said nothing. She stroked my hair once and again, as seating herself, with the gentle, superior tranquillity of old, though softened now, she drew me down on a hassock at her feet.

That caress was much, very much from her. Nevertheless, it was not the silence of perfect understanding passing speech: our natures were perhaps too different. But it meant closer union arising from the rest of mind we had both found in the chapel. After a little, we both spoke in broken whispers; then feeling chastened yet comforted agreed to go back, lest the others of our little outer world might wonder at our absence.

A long suite of reception-rooms opened one out of another from the chapel till they ended in the morning-room. Through these we now returned, to avoid the direct long corridor, where our presence might have seemed strange. We went in silence down the great rooms, the walls heavy with pictures in floriated Italian frames, the tables inlaid with beautiful mosaics, forbidding use, the splendid settees and vast arm-chairs, silently demanding no happy family party, but a magnificent assemblage, a throng of gorgeously-dressed, highly-titled visitors.

So, going softly, as became two women who had been in spirit on the high hills and solitary places of prayer, we entered the small writing-room which was separated only by curtains from the morning-room. (The same little room in which my unlucky note to Clair St. Leger had once been written.) A subdued murmur of voices came from the room beyond—then a woman's sobs.

We both stopped short. Alice's voice was heard exclaiming in vehement tearful reproach :

"You don't care for me any more ! Oh, I see it ; I know it—I am miserable about it. And it is Pleasance, my sister, who has come between us. Ever since she came here, last winter, you have only eyes for *her* . . ."

My mother caught my wrist hard, and transfixed me with an aghast look, utterly bewildered. Then another voice answered, deep and troubled it seemed, but stern.

"Do not let your sister's name be mentioned between us in this way ever again ! You have still, to the full, all the ordinary friendship that ever subsisted between us, Lady Digges, but whatever regard I may have for *her* is not to be discussed. She is too good and pure—it seems desecration."

The blood in my veins seemed swelling to painfulness,

my heart was beating ; for even before hearing those well-known tones, I knew, as my mother did not, that the other person inside there was not Sir Dudley. And the disgrace of overhearing it all . . . !

"Good and pure !" sneered Alice, bitterly laughing. "Yes. She was in love with Mr. St. Leger all the time, and yet she was designing enough to try and entrap you too. She did not care for you—I *did* ! I am not happy here, whatever you may preach to me. I am miserable," . . . and she sobbed afresh, in one of the lightly-come, gusty passions we knew so well of old.

Oh Alice, Alice !

"Good heavens, Lady Digges, this is a most painful conversation. Good-bye—forgive me for seeming abrupt, and I thank you heartily for all your kind hospitality ; but—but I have to catch my train, and must thank Sir Dudley first for having been as good a friend to me as yourself. . . . When next we meet, may you be very happy—good-bye."

A door closed : he was gone. Sometimes perhaps the bravest thing a man can do is to run away. Next instant, Alice, rushing from the spot, pushed back the curtains of the little room—and found my mother and me like two statues, transfixed.

The scene that followed was terrible to me then, is painful to me still in memory. We two stood as if guilty before the infuriated woman for whom was our shame and sorrow.

Our poor Alice had always been giddy-headed, as easily roused to tears or laughter as a vane is blown about by every breeze. Now she was wrought upon by such a variety of conflicting feelings as to seem beside herself. Even our very presence there hardly seemed to surprise her, so hastily she grasped the opportunity for

pouring forth denunciations and railings on my head. Words, words, words! — as unreasonable, as unfounded; as those she had uttered against me before; not one whose point could prick my conscience, that was strong in innocence, but still I bent before the shower of hurtling arrows. Then my mother stood forward to protect me by interposing her authority. In vain. She had always suffered Alice, as if in play, to turn aside the gentle power to which the rest of us had bent; now it was disregarded in earnest. With her face very pale and hands trembling, but still in a firm voice, the mother rebuked, besought, reminded her daughter of her position, the duties she owed to her husband—as a mother might.

Alice turned upon her in withering scorn. “Duties, duties! You never talked about them to me *before* I was married!—pray leave me now to settle all that with my husband for myself. Did you ever tell me of anything then beyond Sir Dudley’s fortune and position?”

“Alice, Alice, my child, indeed I did, but you would not listen . . .”

With a well-known gesture, my sister put up both hands to her ears; a pretty trick she had no doubt practised when the warning admonition was given.

“It is all your doing—yours!” and she stamped her foot on the ground. “You would have me marry him, and now I am tired of my life and miserable, and have you to thank for it.”

“Alice, for pity’s sake, for shame’s sake, be quiet,” I expostulated, helping my mother, who had turned deadly pale, into a chair. For the first and last, the only time in my life, I spoke in anger to my elder sister, and that with my whole soul. “*It was your own doing.* Though I am younger than you, I warned you last year when you were engaged, but you would not listen to me. Now, if

you wish to live as a good and true woman, there is nothing left for you but to bear your burden in silence."

Alice looked at me, perfectly silenced a few moments.

"Yes; you are my younger sister, and this is my house. As you have dared to plot against me with your friend Mr. Bracy, to play the spy and now to insult me to my face, I never wish to listen to you again as long as I live. The sooner you leave Broadhams the better, I think."

Saying this with a freezing air of suddenly-assumed dignity, that would have been a laughable turning of the tables if it had not been so terribly real to us, she walked out of the room. She never gave one backward glance at my mother's almost fainting figure, at my pitiful appeal, as, with one arm outstretched after her, with the other I supported the poor head that was bowed by the ingratitude of a favourite child.

Ah, Alice!—had all your light, laughing ways and soulless, quick angers, which we used to think as pretty as the passing tempers of a child, come to this?

That evening, as a yellow sinking sunlight was making Broadhams look almost cheerful, my mother said to me finally in her own room:

"Yes, dear; you have been a great comfort to me to-day, Pleasance. It is best we should go away from here. Then perhaps Alice will feel sorry . . ." My mother's still luminous eyes, once so bright, were rimmed red with weeping, her face was very pale, but the features set with a hardness of sorrowful dignity never noticeable there before. To make Alice sorry! How little she could have believed in such a wish but a short time ago. She went on low and broken-voiced: "As Beau says he hopes to make a fortune by turning artist, I must make a home for him in London. I cannot desert my poor

boy, for I fear" (speaking even lower) "that with his fine prospects so lately destroyed he will become wild and ruin himself. For you and Rose, dear, I *had* hoped you would both have been happy with Alice, but now . . ."

"We should be far more really happy on crusts with you, mother. Here it would never have been home."

"But we are almost beggars, dear child. I never told you the worst before, hoping it was not necessary, but the bare truth is, I can hardly support one more besides Beau on my own poor little fortune, which is all left—and your Aunt Bee has already adopted poor Bob." . . . Then after a pause, with a humble tone, so new it was infinitely touching: "Could not you, dear, accept your godmother's invitation? It came down after the funeral, I remember, and you seemed to put away the idea with distaste at the time; but now . . ."

For dear Mrs. Gladman had written, on hearing of our ruined fortunes, to offer me a home, for as soon and as long as ever I would accept it.

"Oh, mother, I love her really and very dearly, too," I murmured; "but—but if I went there, there is another person in the house . . ."

"Who?" she asked, struck by my hesitating manner.

"John Gladman is—I mean—he is not . . . I do like him very much indeed; but still I never could like him well enough—or not at all *in that way*," I stammered, blushing.

"John Gladman! Did *he* think he could have you, then?" uttered my mother in a tone of half-contemptuous surprise; then more slowly, after a few moments of reflection, murmured: "Well . . . after all—he has a fair enough income for a country gentleman, and they are of an old family."

"Oh, mother! as if that was everything."

My mother started, then with a quivering voice :

"Perhaps you are right. At least, henceforth, I will never help in settling any marriage again, that no more of my children may have to reproach me. As to this, I will not press you, child; your Aunt Bee and I will do what we can between us (she is always faithful to me); and meanwhile Rose shall go to Mrs. Gladman till this fancy of the young man has blown over. In a few months I hope to be able to afford keeping my daughters with myself; meanwhile, poor though we are, *I will not stay on here*. . . . Now leave me, dear. Yes, I wish to be alone—it is best for me."

So I went away reluctantly, leaving her proud and gentle spirit solitary, and stricken by the sharpest pang—that inflicted by a favourite child.

As I passed through the round gallery, on the way to my own room, I heard Alice's laugh suddenly ringing out below—a laugh so carelessly happy and childish, it seemed as if she was not conscious of having given a moment's pain to any one. I looked over the balustrade; and there in the hall below she stood with Sir John Dudgeon, who had ridden over from a neighbouring house where he was staying.

CHAPTER XXXII.

MARCH! The bitter sting of winter has vanished from the air, though it is a cool evening. The daffodils are out in pale yellow glory under the hedgerows. The rooks are cawing on their homeward ways. There are

plaintive baas of tender lambkins to be heard from the close behind the orchard, and bigger lambs are frisking down in the open meadow.

On this especial March evening, I was rather slowly dragging my tired and muddy-booted feet along the edge of a ploughed field, belonging to the Barn farm; for I was staying with my grand-aunt. Bess herself was ahead of me, quite active though bent very much. "How do you think this mangold looks?" she was calling out sharply to a third individual. Which latter, seemingly as much interested as herself in the growth of the mangolds, went plunging into the sticky wet furrows, and reporting progress in a cheery voice. Said the individual then, coming up to me, with kindly interest (as if my likings or distastes could matter to any one now!):

"You don't care much for merely walking over a farm, Miss Pleasance? You like fields and woods in summer better."

"I used to like going round the farm at home—at Stoke, Mr. Bracy. But then that was with my father."

"Ah, yes. That makes all the difference in the world, of interest or the want of it," answered Fulke Bracy, for it was he, with such a friendly ring of sympathy in his voice that my heart ought to have warmed to him. But my heart did not feel able to warm to any one now. I looked at him, as if *from the outside*, at the outside. No inner light from the soul brightened my vision, though it was aware of meeting his all kindled by the kindly warmth in his good gray eyes. Yes, aware of it!—and duly grateful to him: that was all.

We were on the top of a ploughed hill; a cool, clear sky free of clouds bent around us to the far, sharply-defined horizon. The brawling of a river could be heard

on two sides as it skirted the hill, but it was hidden from view by a wood, through which rose up a thin, very thin gray smoke from the chimneys of the Barn. Fires were not extravagantly kept up by day in Bee's family mansion. Every one was expected to be out of doors in the fresh air, while daylight lasted. In the evenings, we might burn all the timber on the place, or the house down, for aught my grand-aunt cared. Now she looked round at us in her keen way.

"I'm going down to the cowhouses by the muddiest way there is, because it's nearest; and I want neither of you. I want to have a talk with Tozer." (Tozer was the steward, gardener, coachman, butler! on occasion, frequent opponent, and only too trusted *fidus Achates* of my grand-aunt.) "Later I must see what fresh mischief last night's spate has done at the bridge; you may wait for me there, or not, just as you both please. Now, Bracy—I can open the gate for myself!"

And therewith shaking a stout walking-stick defiantly at our male companion, who insisted all the same on unfastening a dangerously rickety gate, which was darned with thorn-bushes to make it do its difficult duty, Bee plunged down a very Slough of Despond between two hedges, and left us alone. (By the way, my grand-aunt had a trick of calling gentlemen by their surnames in a full-flavoured, old-fashioned way. It did not sound vulgar; only Addisonian.)

"Well, shall we go down by the road to the bridge?" I asked, rousing myself up to assume the part of agreeable hostess.

"Whatever you like. Yes, certainly; I shall be very glad," replied the guest with a sort of abstracted air suddenly come to him, as if Bee had taken his wits off down the lane.

"What a lovely drive this one must have been!" observed the agreeable hostess, as we struck into the little park and came on the approach winding downwards to the Barn.

"I beg your pardon—yes; very lovely." The visitor seemed waking out of dreamland.

"But isn't it sad to see it in this neglected state?"

"Oh yes, very sad; very sad, indeed."

If people answer like a dull echo at one's elbow, agreeable conversation is impossible; best give it up! The hostess vanished in an imperceptible shrug of the shoulders, and only a slim, straight, yet dejected-feeling young person in heavy, black, winter garments, Pleasance Brown—who once had never felt heavy or dejected!—went silently side by side with the abstracted guest.

The drive in question was so overgrown with grass, groundsel, and such-like useful herbs in their own place, that in open parts its very existence was scarcely manifest; elsewhere it was almost overspread by stretches of rhododendrons bordering it on either side, while higher above laburnums and lilacs made a dense coppice that would soon be a glory of tender spring colours.

This was the most used approach to the house, too: there were some fresh cart-ruts on it.

The other drive that wound by the brawling river, whose hoarse murmur we were now approaching, ended in a bridge of larch-poles and sods, and a roofless, cut stone lodge, with the Beaumanoir crest over the empty door; for the Baron's Stay (as was the pretty old name which had now degenerated vulgarly into the Barn) had always been the dower-house of that family. Now, leaving the house itself hidden by uncared-for shrubbery, we came by a wood path to the river, where a picturesque little scene opened out before us.

Around were great glossy-hued Portugal laurels, delicate acacias, and such-like foreign tree attendants outside an English country-house, bending across the rushing water to greet an abruptly rising background on the opposite bank. Between these hurried a brown, brawling brook, swollen with flood, flecked with foam, as it dashed like a living thing down among boulders, making here little flashing falls, and there big dark pools, all overhung with alder and willow.

Our path led up to where a bridge had once crossed boldly the noisy, narrow torrent, but *now*—only two piers stood tantalisingly in the water, making one long to jump from each to each, to cross to the other side. It was plainly not in yesternight's freshet that the old bridge had been swept away, for some grass grew on the pier-heads, and they had mouldered as low as the level of the road.

I sat down on one of the two large stones that had ended the bridge parapet, and resting there idly, looked down on the ivy-trails overhanging the water; and the gap below my feet where the bridge should have been; and at the hungry, dark, amber-coloured current, itself a constant delight.

Mr. Bracy did not sit down. He leant instead against the ruined wall, a foot or two from me, and dislodged little bits of mortar, which he dropped with careless aim, but restlessly, into the still-closing water. Why could he not be still, like me? He used to be much pleasanter, when his lordly reposefulness of manner amused little Rose into sarcastic remarks behind his back at Broadhams; and Alice would retort that he had the true *grand air*, the manner of the race of Vere de Vere. He first broke silence; speaking low in a constrained tone as if more lay behind;

"Where is your brother, Beaumanoir, now?"

"He is supposed to be in London, where he wishes to live as an artist, you know; but he is always going off for two or three days, as he can never stay still long. My mother wants to make a home for him, so she has taken a little house in Camden Hill, with a studio at the back. Beau calls it the maternal dust-hole."

"You never used to speak so bitterly, Miss Pleasance."

"I never had occasion to feel so, Mr. Bracy. Good heavens! how my mother has devoted herself all her life long to my brother Beau—and what is the result?"

"Those who worship cannot expect to be likewise the worshipped. Have you not found out that, yet? As the French say, 'Il y a toujours l'un qui baise, et l'autre qui tend la joue.' But I cannot imagine any man who is not the *better*, at least, for a mother's affection. Although he may not show much outward sign of returning it, still, depend upon it, he feels it."

"Yes? . . . Yes! How much worse might he not be, you mean, without that restraining influence?" I murmured; and then there was renewed silence but for the babbling and here and there hoarse chiding of the brook below.

After a while I spoke again.

"Mr. Bracy, I have been thinking a great deal lately . . ."

"I have noticed that, ever since I came yesterday evening, lady fair. You have been thinking so much you have almost forgotten speech—towards an insignificant mortal like myself, at least."

"I *am* so sorry" (in a polite, even tone that did not sound in the least truly and inwardly repentant, though outwardly apologetical). "But I should be so glad of

your opinion, as to what I have been thinking about. What is to become of Bob?"

"To become of him? What do you mean?—have you to do his thinking as to his career?"

"Yes, that is just it, Mr. Bracy. The dear old March Hare never could think for himself, so I must do it for him. He was always meant for the army, by my mother, you know, and he always hated the idea. Now he says he can't go on with it, as his tutor was too expensive—and there is all his cramming wasted! That is a dreadful thought to me."

"I shouldn't let it distress you too much," said Bracy drily. "I fancy that in the words of the Psalmist, 'the ploughers would have ploughed long furrows on his back;' and I very much doubt whether all cramming is not wasted material. But are you really so anxious for your brother to go into a line regiment, and live in affluence on his magnificent pay? He has perhaps some private means besides?"

"Not one *brass farthing!*"—uttered as emphatically as if I had really ever seen with my own eyes any such base metal coin. "Dear Bee always said she will leave him this place, and he loves it. He loves it even better than Stoke, I think; perhaps because he has looked forward to its being his—but what is that for a prospect?" in a mournful tone.

"I should think it a very lovely prospect," looking round admiringly on woods, river, and the whole delightful early spring scene. "Only—it might cost something to put into order again."

"That is it, Mr. Bracy. Don't you see—you know Aunt Bee of old, and how things are, here. There is just enough to keep her own body and soul together, and no more. And Bob has a bigger body (I won't say

anything of the soul), and he eats more, of course, than she does, and drinks—though he only drinks beer; while she takes spring water”—turning off my melancholy discourse with a little laugh. Then, still haunted by the subject, and tempted by his air of silent sympathy to disburthen my mind, I resumed: “Bob talks of living happily as a farmer like John Gladman, but Wheatfield Farm is very differently managed. Poor fellow!—he says if only he had some capital he might manage to get things right here, for farming was always what he loved best. Aunt Bee has offered to give him up the reins, bless her dear old soul! but she has no ready money; and Tozer, as Bob says, is a regular old Turk who hates any change.”

Silence for some moments. Mr. Bracy seemed thinking, but about what I could not tell. Perhaps it might be that all this was no concern of his—and on this idea I spoke humbly.

“However, I ought not to trouble you with my private worries. I am quite sorry—we ought each to bear our own burdens. Let us talk of something else.”

“Not at all,” responded Bracy, rousing briskly from his reverie. “I remember, Pleasance, if you do not, our agreement to be friends last summer. That gives me a certain amount of right to hear about your troubles; besides, I like the March Hare very much.”

I looked at him astonished. He had called me by my Christian name, evidently without knowing he did so; and not lightly either, but in an earnest, respectful tone. Clearly it was not for the first time, in his own mind.

Then, as I remained silent, he added in a rather forced voice, and flushing red—to my still greater surprise:

"I wonder if Bob would take me for a partner. I have long thought there was a good deal to be made out of this farm and place. Lately I have been wanting greatly to have some country interests, and I could advance . . ."

"A partner? Oh, no, no," my lips uttered, almost dismayed, in intense gratitude, but as strong refusal. "How good you are, Mr. Bracy; but such a thing is *impossible*! As well fling your money down there into the stream."

"Wait a moment. Hear me out first. During the many years I have visited here since a boy, it has been impossible not to see how your aunt has been—well, *robbed*! There seemed no use in telling her before, because she never cared for more than just enough—and seemed so happy in her ignorance, it would have been cruel to enlighten her."

"Do you mean—Tozer?" in bewilderment. Tozer was to my grand-aunt that roc's egg treasure which so many solitary ladies believe themselves happy in possessing—a perfect factotum, an infallible, trusty, tyrannical serving-man.

"I do indeed mean old Tozer. It has been shameful; but—well, hitherto, as you all seemed provided for, where was the use in speaking? But now Bob should see to it."

"Thank you for telling me, Mr. Bracy. Poor Bob! he will not find it an easy task."

"Which brings us back to our muttons," responded my old friend Mr. Fulke, with a curious, subdued smile. "As I said, I love the country; and even knowing I had a share in a patch of it when up in London, would be a consolation. Another liking of mine is safe speculation, and, as I said, there is decidedly something to be made of the Barn; therefore, if Bob will let me join him, I may

feel pretty safe in advancing some capital on improvements, and we can divide our profits accordingly. Miss Pleasance, you shall see we shall make a small fortune out of it."

This last was said with a prescient, triumphant emphasis, that ought to have carried conviction straight home to my flutteringly happy yet irresolute heart. Ought I—could it be right to allow Fulke Bracy thus to put himself to possible loss for friendship's sake? And yet, how refuse on my own responsibility such a splendid chance and generous offer for my best-beloved brother?

I fairly stammered in answering:

"It is too good. But, as you say, you always did like dear Bob."

"Yes, so I did; but don't mistake me, Miss Pleasance, I am offering him this because *you* asked me to help you in thinking for him."

This was said slowly, and with a certain amount of weight that made its meaning unmistakable; yet he was again looking down into the river with set features and unseeing gray eyes. Clair St. Leger while saying such a thing would have looked at me full with a laughing blue gaze, and noted every effect of his words in my conscious face.

"Because *I* did—I am so sorry, then," I murmured.

"Why so?"

Fulke this time turned round slowly, and looked at me straight.

"Because you have laid a weight of obligation on my friendship, I can never repay."

The moment the words were said I regretted them; would have given worlds to recall them. For I saw his reply in my old friend's face, even before the answer came, quick and eager.

"Don't speak of obligation—don't think of it as such! I was wrong even to put what I will so gladly do for your brother in the way I did. Only it would be more than repayment, if, in time, you could like me better than as a friend. Don't answer me now . . . I said in time, in time!"

What I said I do not know; but I seemed to withdraw into myself with an unconscious gesture of almost dismay, and of putting away the idea as an impossibility. He added gently, but in haste:

"Perhaps, indeed, I should not have spoken now; but that I fancied you might already have forgotten a matter that pained you at Broadhams, now that St. Leger has sold himself, and given up his best chances of happiness."

"Sold himself? How? What do you mean? To—to Mrs. Jessop? Is it *true*? How do you know it?" I answered, with a face that was moved and lips that slightly quivered despite myself. For I knew in my own heart in the last three months that it would come to pass; but no one had ever as yet told me so.

"Is it *not* true? What I heard was common report. But, if you have not heard it, I am sorry I spoke—very sorry."—So saying, Fulke Bracy drew himself up, and half turning away looked back at the house nestled among the trees. This part of our conversation had now taken such a disagreeable turn, he would fain have walked away from the troubled questions he read coming in my moved face and pleading eyes. But it had gone too far for that.

"You need not be sorry for telling me about him," I went on, recovering myself. "If it is not the case yet, it will very likely be so. It cannot and *does not* signify to me now; Mr. St. Leger has passed out of my life."

"Have you given him up, then?" asked Bracy.

"Say rather that he gave me up," I answered cynically, in the bitterness of my spirit, as if wishing not to spare myself every possible mortification. "He could not afford more than a flirtation with me—I am penniless, you know! But this much I have to thank him for, that henceforth I shall never torment myself more by caring for any one. I rather wish I could, for it would make me seem fresh and young again, but I cannot."

"Hi, hi! gee up, there—gee up! Are you two there? Come and help me to drive this calf back to the paddock. It has been eating all the young shoots on my best old fuchsia bush," cried Bee's voice in desperation from a little distance, each of her words being separated by audible whacks.

She was near the house, in what was still called by courtesy the garden; a weedy spot among the shrubs backed by rank laurels, half enclosed by ragged yews, all spreading wildly where they should not. In the centre of a plot of long, coarse grass was a broken-down fountain, and here a healthy red calf was plunging sportively amongst some neglected fuchsia bushes, the only surviving evidences of culture.

As we approached to her aid, I said hastily to my companion in an undertone: "People talk so much gossip, don't they? One can't always quite believe all one hears—can one?"

"Perhaps not. No, I suppose one cannot always," he replied in a guarded, even tone, and said no more, but promptly began obeying Bee's excited requests.

As I stood still, it struck me that in my eagerness to ascertain something more about Clair St. Leger, my last remark had been ill-timed and ungracious.

Feeling this reflection had come too late, and with my mind full of new thoughts, I went sadly enough homewards; for the Barn was now the only home remaining to me worthy that name.

The said old house, or rather what now remained of it, was exquisitely situated a little above the river, down to which sloped little terraces that the sheep closely nibbled. Before the door was a curious, hardly human object; seeming to end in a double head, strongly suggestive of a pair of old boots that rather needed re-soling.

"Bob!" I exclaimed, recognising that individual, who was thus solitarily amusing himself by standing on his head. "What are you doing?" The feet slowly swung down; and with a red, mild face, and a half-ashamed laugh, my brother resumed his usual standpoint of existence, and looked back at me.

"I was taking the air, Pleasance; that's all. It is my favourite way of doing so."

"Can you not find anything better to do?" I asked, almost sharply, inwardly irritated by the contrast between the troubled sea of thoughts tossing in my mind and his placid, chewing-the-cud state.

"What else have I got to do?" answered poor Bob humbly, yet with something touching in his patient tone.

What, indeed! The offer of that money and such a splendid partner on the farm! Not knowing what to think—whether he would get the offer now, whether he ought even to accept it—I went still more slowly indoors.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE Baron's Stay, to restore to the old Barn its due honours, stood, as was said, close above the noisy little river.

There was now only a small part of the ancient dower-house left, that had not been dispersed by the element of fire. This was just the two-storied main body of gray stone, containing the hall, a sitting-room or two, and the rooms above this. On one side this portion ended in a pretty gable, with twisted chimney, carved eaves, and hanging jessamine curtains; but its opposite side broke down pitiably but very picturesquely into ruins, hung with ivy. Two more wings stretched in roofless dilapidation at the back, with eyeless window-sockets; the whole surrounding an empty grass-grown courtyard. All this part of the house had been burned down.

On the evening of the day last described we were sitting in the dining-room. We had all just partaken of one of my grand-aunt's characteristic dinners. First came caviare, sent by a Russian prince, met in the Caucasus by Miss Beaumanoir. Next followed a fowl, buried in rice and gravy, its toes sticking out limply from the tomb instead of a stone tablet to its virtues; itself being as tough as a brickbat. This my grand-aunt called pillau—and Bob and I were in inward doubts whether, like the old traveller she was, she would not have liked to have partaken of it with her fingers. Afterwards we had each been helped to a suet dumpling, supposed to suit our British taste. Bee and I drank only fair spring water with this; but Bob had village beer (which our guest insisted on sharing). There was also a bottle of very old Beaumanoir Madeira especially for Fulke Bracy;

with strange liqueurs bearing outlandish names, and each supposed to have been brewed in some mountain monastery, in wild fastnesses and deserts, seldom visited save by such adventurous spirits as our now aged hostess.

It was not a large meal, for our grand-aunt was only used to eat very sparingly herself. Bob, however, crowned the poor foundation with a huge mountain of bread and cheese. If Mr. Bracy felt famished he manfully suppressed all outward signs thereof; and when Turkish coffee followed, very thick, black, and strong, in tiny handleless cups, I alone seemed to my secret self still hungry, or at least not satisfied.

Never had I given a thought before to what I ate or drank, or how I fared: even now it seemed to me that bread and water served with bright silver and fine damask would be delightful. But the change from Stoke to the terrible dilapidation, the disorder, discomfort, and even dirt of poor Aunt Bee's home, notwithstanding her kindness, was severe. I was already sick to death of a month of this strange hand-to-mouth life at the Barn, where to-night reigned unwonted cleanliness and order. My soul hankered after the flesh-pots of Egypt; that is to say, for the elegance and quiet, the ease and refinement, of my dear lost home.

The room we were in was wainscoted, like the rest of the house, in dark wood to the ceiling; only relieved by some carving round the panels. By day, it was dimly lit by one deep window with heavy stone mullions that left the further chamber in general obscurity. Even this night, though we had a roaring fire of logs on the stone hearth, and a paraffin lamp on the carved oak table, little was to be descried of the fine oak buffet over yonder, inlaid with mother-o'-pearl, and bearing the date 1660. This was to be Bob's legacy: it had been promised him

since he was a small boy. Upon it stood two very handsome, but, alas ! grimy silver salvers ; last Beaumanoir relics, for the bailiffs had been here in olden days. The rest of the furniture was poor enough indeed, save, for my especial pride and possession, an old inlaid escritoire. This had been a never-failing source of delight in my childhood's days, being full of the most surprising hidden drawers and nooks all carved with rhymes round their edges ; and having a little temple in its heart with a Cupid, tiny mirrors, pillars, and pendant lamps. " There — I'll give it a present to you, child, now and for always," Bee had said in those days. " It belonged to your great-grandfather, my father, and then to my poor brother, your grandfather, who treasured it so much that when this house was burnt down (he was staying here at the time with me), this was the first thing he flew to save. They say it is worth *hundreds* ! it is such a fine old specimen ; and for that reason I never would let it go, however hardly I was pinched—but, bless you ! I'd far rather splash my ink over a common deal table any day."

Besides this cherished escritoire, there was a great sofa apparently made of horsehair and gridirons. On this, Bob, dinner ended, had flung himself near the fire-blaze and was sweetly sleeping.

My grand-aunt and Mr. Bracy had placed a draught-board on the table, immediately after the Turkish coffee had been removed. " Let me see—the last time you were here, six months ago, you beat me," cried the old lady, sitting up straight, with great zest — " I must have my revenge."

" Yes ; but the time we played before that again, a year ago, you made an example of me, Miss Beaumanoir, as I distinctly remember ; so that we keep even, you see," returned Fulke Bracy, with no less eager earnestness ;

yet a minute before when my aunt had turned her back, I had caught him stifling a yawn.

It struck me that he must be a good-hearted man, who thus came alone twice a year to cheer the solitary life of a strange old woman. Certainly, as my grand-aunt bluntly declared, he had come earlier this year than ever before ; and she roundly taxed him with finding my society and Bob's an attraction beyond that of her own withered charms. All the same, as he smilingly reminded her, he had never failed to come before.

They had been playing some time, and only the occasional click of the draughtsmen was audible in their engrossed silence, together with Bob's heavy breathing, and the sputtering of the fire-logs. Meanwhile, I held a large old book in my hands—"Cœlebs in Search of a Wife." Bee's whole library offered nothing more amusing to divert my heavy thoughts, excepting "Gulliver's Travels" and the "Arabian Nights." But gradually the heavy volume slipped on my knee ; and leaning my cheek on my hand, with my eyes fixed on the fire-glow, I was wrapped in a meditation sad enough.

A slight sound as light as the tapping of an ivy-leaf on the window-pane struck my ear, but hardly roused me till the old lurcher, Bee's favourite dog, lifted his head from where he lay on the warm stone hearth. He pricked his ears, and turned his eyes towards the curtainless window, but that was from force of habit, for he was almost stone-blind. I looked round, too—and gave a little gasp, but felt too startled to speak. From the darkness outside a face, shadowy and bodiless, seemed to look in upon me. If there was a figure also, either it was hidden by the thick ivy, or the light of the room only showed a face like that of a ghost. Next instant it had vanished into darkness.

It was the face of—Clair St. Leger.

The players went on undisturbed behind an old Chinese screen, between them and the window ; Bob slumbered still ; the old dog laid down his head again. I only sat upright, my eyes wide distended, my face and hands deadly cold, feeling sure I had seen a vision.

The tall clock ticked slowly on and on, a cricket chirruped several times ; still no one looked round or took notice of me. I began to recover myself now ; my breath came easier, and furtively with a trembling hand I wiped the cold damp from my brow. Whatever had happened—if this was indeed a vision at the parting of soul and body such as I believed, I was glad none should ever know of it but myself. It was my secret.

After a while, one of the maids entered the room in a shy, frightened manner, and sidled towards me as if looking for something. She was the only young servant in the house, nevertheless she was the only one I disliked ; being a carrotty-haired, muddy-complexioned girl, whose eyes never could look one straight in the face. She was old Tozer's daughter.

"What do you want here, at this hour?" demanded Bee sharply, taking notice for once of this infringement of good household rules.

"Oh, please, Miss, I was only searching for the cat. I wanted to shut her up for the night, but she's not anywhere"—and the girl dived as if to look under the table beside me.

To my astonishment, there came a little tug at my skirt ; then another. With my nerves all on tension I started, not knowing what this could be, feeling absolutely frightened of I knew not what. A red hand stole next from under the table holding a folded leaf of paper, plainly torn from a pocket-book, and laid it on my knee.

This was so eerie, that, although without speaking, I drew back and involuntarily looked round, as if about to appeal to the others who were again intent upon their game. But the servant-girl retreating from her plantigrade attitude under the table caught my eye, and gave me a warning look, putting her finger on her lip. Then she left the room slowly, eyeing me before closing the door with a peculiarly beckoning glance.

Of course, I had known it was she who pulled my dress, but was so dazed still with the apparition at the window that I could not understand the girl's conduct. Almost trembling I unfolded the paper, and saw pencilled in Clair's writing :

"Come outside, and speak to me if only for a minute. I must see you once more ; don't refuse me, darling !

"CLAIR."

Two minutes later, I stood outside the dining-room, in the cold, dark hall, looking round in the shadows fearfully. The only light came from a farthing candle in a tin sconce against the black wainscoting of the passage down near the kitchen. My footsteps echoed on the bare stone floor and up into the high raftered ceiling as I stole along, hardly knowing where to go. Then a figure stepped out from behind one of the black, big wooden pillars supporting the staircase gallery, and with difficulty I repressed a little cry as it touched me silently on the shoulder in the almost complete darkness. It was the Tozer girl, who whispered with an impertinent familiarity: "He's waiting for you among the bushes there. I've left the front door open for you to slip out."

Turning from her close breath on my ear, with a

vague sense of being lowered and contaminated by such an ally, I mechanically took a shawl she handed me, and drew it closely round my head and shoulders ; feeling more as if it hid me from myself than as a protection against the weather. So amazed—as if without any will of my own, but walking in a dream—I, Pleasance Brown, found myself outside in the cool, damp night air of the spring-time.

I had not made three uncertain steps from the porch when a presence stepped beside me from behind a dark buttress, caught me tightly in its arms, and drawing back my shawl covered my face with kisses. For a moment or two I was so taken unawares, and still overcome with my late fear and faintness—besides the extraordinary surprise of Clair St. Leger being here at the Barn, at night, too—that I did not, or perhaps could not, resist him. Then, with a returning flash of pride and memory, in self-anger against my momentary weakness, I endeavoured to push him away, with very decided strength of purpose in my action.

In vain ! Clair only tightened his hold the more, and kissed me again on the cheek and lips, with a force in which there seemed no respect, but only passion left.

It was against my will now he did it. He knew it ; I felt he knew it, and a sudden almost hatred of anger took possession of my soul, even when in his arms.

The dining-room window was so near, the rays from the lamp inside falling on our very path, that I dared not utter an exclamation, for my own sake. Then, with a violent silent effort, I stood beside him free.

There had been, no doubt, in mind no less than expressed action a struggle of will between us, till he must have felt mine would submit no longer. Some sound of whispered reproach or entreaty must have

escaped him, for inside the room the old dog gave a low, suspicious growl. We stood turned to statues by the window.

A cold thrill ran through me, and quick thoughts came of shame at the situation—of bewildering doubt.

But Clair caught my hand, before I could think more, whispering: "Hang the dog; he'll discover all if we stay here. . . Come away a little, where I can speak to you without the walls having ears. I *must* speak to you to-night, Pleasance; you will come, if ever you loved me. You do love me, still; don't you? You do! . . ."

It was in my heart to say NO and mean it too! he had so killed what feelings of attachment still survived in me, by outraging my self-respect. Yet my woman's pride, instead of being lessened thereby, only grew and grew with each moment. But, not knowing in truth what I now felt for him, I did go mechanically to hear what he might say. It seemed to me, now, that he had come to renew our lapsed engagement; and, so strange is the human heart, I was sorry for it!—and yet felt bound to listen if he desired it. First love seemed to me sacred—and not with honour to be put aside first by *me*.

So going side by side, though I would not let him touch my hand again, we stole, two silent shadows, across the rough garden-plot, carefully beyond the radius of light, till we stood under the old garden-wall. Here our voices could not be heard in the parlour. Wet grass was under our feet; dripping bushes, just opening in leaf under spring's sweet charm, surrounded us. A little chill shower came down from a passing cloud, obscuring most of the few faint stars in the night sky. We stood shivering under the partial shelter of a big cherry-laurel, and did not speak for a minute.

Then Clair began first, "Pleasance, come to me!"

opening his arms. I stamped my foot on the wet turf in hot indignation and impatience. Was *this* what he chose to say first, without apology or one word of penitence after his desertion of me and cruel silence; after the terrible desolation of death and the change in my life?—no thought of anything but his own present gratification.

"No, I will not go to you. Don't dare to touch me again without my leave. Tell me, instead, why do *you* come to me?"

"You are not displeased with me; not surely, Pleasance—and because I kissed you?" in the old soft, pliant tones that had so wound themselves round my heart.

"Displeased?—insulted, angered, would be better terms than that of mere displeasure," in bitter echo.

"You used to think differently. You used to kiss me back again," he answered low, with a poor attempt at imitating my scorn, so utterly ignoring all the right and wrong of *then* and *now*, that only a fool or a man in his selfishness but would have understood me better. It came as a taunt to my sore heart; to me who had so waited and waited, for the smallest such sign of affection in the bygone days; and now . . .

So I answered: "Then it was different because I loved you, and *that* made it right; but ever since I have been learning to unlove you. What you did just now was, to treat me not as a lady, as the woman you love, but as—as you might a bar-maid!"

He laughed, a soft, uneasy laugh; but not one deeply moved. Or no; was it not rather with just so much emotion as his nature was capable of feeling? The thought struck me with a keen pang, as if I first knew him as he really was.

"I suppose I ought to apologise for forgetting that I was only human, and that you were—Pleasance Brown."

"But once again, tell me what brings you here to-night? Clair, think of it; I cannot stay out here long—what would they say of us? and you have told me nothing yet! Why, oh, why did you not write, or come to see me openly?"

He groaned.

"Why? Because I am no longer my own master; because I am in debt and desperation; because I have no right to come in the light of day to see you like an honest man. Oh, my poor pretty Pleasance, forgive me—how pretty you looked to-night when I peeped in at the window!" (He had begun stroking my arm now; the man could not exist, it seemed, without caressing or being caressed.) "I believe you never knew how pretty you really are, did you?"

"What can that matter to you now?" I cried out, driven to a far higher pitch of desperation than himself. "I am penniless, remember, and homeless nearly. They tell me you have consoled yourself with Mrs. Jessop and her fortune: *is that true?*"

No answer. Clair had stepped back, leaning against the garden-wall in the darkness. I could not see his face, but some sixth sense seemed to tell me he was at last greatly moved.

"*Is it true?*" I pursued, still more excited. "You have come all the way out here to tell me something. Is that it? *is that true?*" In my own heart, at the moment, I did not believe it true. All along there was no time for thought; except a sudden quick flash that if it were so indeed, he *could* not have come to tell me it. So that, even while pressing my questions, I inwardly rejoiced.

"It is true!" said the unhappy wretch, covering his eyes with one hand.

"Good God!" I murmured. "Then how could you"—in growing passion—"how *dared* you come here to-night?"

"Because I wanted to see you once more; to have you to myself if only for a minute, for the last time. So I came down to the hotel over at D——" (the nearest town) "and drove out to-night in a fly, as I must show myself in town early to-morrow. And no matter what you think of me, I am glad I have done it; I am more satisfied now."

"Are you?" came icily from my lips. "Some murderers I have heard feel quite satisfied, too, when they have done their deed. Let me congratulate you on feeling pleased that you enticed me out here to be insulted!"

"Pleasance," he pleaded, "don't say that; you are so cold, so passionless, almost hard. Any other girl who had been out in the world as you have, would forgive me, and understand that a few lucky men may marry for love, but that for a miserable pauper like me, there is nothing but . . ."

Then, I suppose Clair must have really cared for me; for to my horror he broke down and sobbed out all his story. The miserable tale of how last summer he had honestly meant to work for my sake, but had put it off awhile, and yet awhile; then came debts and difficulties, increasing like a gathering snowball. He had hardly dared look me in the face. Mrs. Jessop had been there too—he saw she meant to have him. No use telling me; of course I could guess, being a woman, how it had all come about. He had seemed each day caught closer in a net. Perhaps, after all, it was the best thing he could do for himself, *under the circumstances*.

"And when—and when—?" I asked, dry-throated.

I was not quite able to speak as I wished ; but wanted to know *when* he had proposed to Mrs. Jessop, out of a burning curiosity all women understand, even though the small details they crave to know, each sting and madden them like so many prickles of poisoned thorns. He answered heavily :

"The day after to-morrow ! . . . We are to be married quite quietly. It is her wish ; as her husband is not very long dead, and people are sure to talk."

"The day . . . after . . . to-morrow . . . !—*married* ! Well, 'happy's the wooing that's not long a-doing,' Mr. St. Leger. And may I ask when and where did you both become engaged ?"

"What does it matter now, as you said yourself ?" he answered roughly, almost rudely. "It was at Broadhams, I believe—after you left, anyhow—that I can tell you for certain, if you care to know."

Yes ; that was well to know, certainly. For the Broadhams party had been broken up suddenly, *the day after I left*, by the news of my poor father's death.

There followed perfect silence between us. Only the cherry-laurel leaves rustled softly in the wind ; an occasional rain-drop pattered down. Clair, it seemed, in the semi-darkness, was half-ashamedly trying to recover himself from the emotion into which he had been betrayed. I stood by, feeling about as still in body as Lot's wife, hoarse-throated, dry-eyed, too, with burning eyeballs.

There seemed a double woman in me. One looking on the man near with an awakened sense that her love for him was dead, and had been so for weeks past of slow-growing contempt, without her knowledge—yet still capable of feeling for his unhappy state that tenderest pity akin to divinest feeling. The other was a woman

whose pride was roused ; whose heart was hot within her with anger and indignation, that only did not leap forth in words to shrivel up his pleas and pitiful self-excuses—but for scorn.

She would never feel the same fresh girl again ; and he had wilfully caused this.

There came though the silence the well-known sound of the old door, that had dropped on its hinges, grating on the stone floor as it was flung energetically open. Out rushed a little posse of dogs, Bob's terriers, yelping with joy to greet the night and freedom ; while Bob's voice called lustily :

"Well, I'm off to the stable to see this puppy in distemper. You won't come, Bracy ?"

"No, thank you. I think I'll stay here and smoke quietly till you come back," was answered in unusually subdued tones.

Just then a cat must have darted through the bushes somewhere, for away went half the canine pack in hot pursuit, giving tongue after their kind. Bob, with gleeful shouts of "Hi ! Hi !" at once joined in the chase. Two laggards, however, blind Jowler, the lurcher, and little Vixen, who was too fat to run, but all the more inquisitive, not seeing which way the hunt swept, had put their noses to the ground, and so came straight towards us. Next moment, the backs of both had bristled ; and their growls, as they hastily retreated with short, sharp barks of defiance and alarm, betrayed at once that here verily was more than a pussy.

"Go ! go !" I whispered in agony to St. Leger, in vain trying my blandishments on our over-zealous guardians. "If you have any caring left for me, go ; that old door in the wall—push ! it is nearly rotten—then you are in the lane."

"Brutes!" he muttered, looking hastily round for the means of escape. "I could choke that old dog with pleasure. Just say good-bye, Pleasance, once more, and then . . ."

There!—As ever he had had no thought for me, only for himself; and now it was too late.

Fulke Bracy's figure stood between him and the door, challenging us in the darkness.

"Hullo! Stop, you sir—stop. What are you doing here at this hour?"—then looking with recognition in our mute faces in accents of the extremest surprise: "What! St. Leger and . . . Miss Brown!! I *beg* your pardon. Forgive me for intruding, it was quite unintentionally, I assure you." And with a tone and manner I should never forget if I lived to be a dead-withered old woman—in which sounded a hundred smaller tones, pained surprise, nobility, regret, hurt self-pride that strove not to think of self, all blended by true manliest reverence for womanhood in whatever situation, such as he could alone have learned from humbly following the example of

The first true gentleman that ever lived,

he turned on his heel.

"Stay, Mr Bracy," I cried in hot impulse, hardly knowing what I said. "I want to go back to the house with you. You are too old a friend to be ever an intruder . . . Mr. St. Leger, I do not want to be unkind, but you must go now; and you ought to have gone sooner, as I asked you. Good-bye—I will wish you as much happiness in your future life as—as is possible."

My voice dropped, I was so sorry for him, so ashamed; and yet stood upright, conscious of my own rectitude as a woman, and would not stoop to seem otherwise.

"I am going, Miss Brown. Good-night," said Clair bitterly, vouchsafing no word of recognition to his former friend, whose lofty tone he strove—with what a weak imitation!—to echo. "Had I known that Mr. Bracy was staying here, I should of course have understood that you would not care for my presence." And therewith raising his hat cavalierly, he turned away.

The rotten old door was violently shaken; there was the sound of a receding foot-fall down the stony lane. He was gone.

I breathed a sigh of relief. Then turning impressively to Fulke Bracy, who stood with eyes downcast on the ground, waiting my pleasure, as it were: "Whatever you may have thought, seeing us together, believe me, what I told you this evening was true. I will have nothing more in this world to say to Clair St. Leger! I never knew he was coming here to-night. You are a true man, I think. There are very few left I care for in this world, or who care for me, but you have always been kind. May I tell you all about it?—only first say you believe me."

"I believe you utterly incapable of doing anything that was not from right and good motives, without the necessity of your saying a word more; so why distress yourself by doing so?" answered Fulke softly but sadly.

"But you could not understand otherwise. I must tell you . . . indeed I must, as you saw him here to-night," was my trembling answer; then in hurried accents explained all, ending, "*and he is to be married the day after to-morrow!*"

My old friend remained very, very silent. At last he said, low, only this: "What can I say? You yourself would not wish me to blame or judge this other man, whatever I may think." (He was right there.) "Only

this I may say, you have been severely tried. God bless you, poor child ; and thank you for telling me."

Up came Bob cheerily. "Well, we had a rare chivy. It was a strange cat, and deserved being chased. The dogs know better than to hunt our own. Why, Pleasance, what are you doing out here?"

"Looking at the stars with me. Let us hope there is a very bright one for herself, somewhere in the far distance," said Bracy in his ever manly voice.

My secret was safe with him.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

Yes ! My secret was safe enough. But, still, all that night I sat up by my window till the solitary candle burned out—none other was to be had. There in the bare, black-raftered room, where comforts were little provided, I sat and shivered to myself, though not from cold, being wrapped in a shawl. But it was a terribly wild night, dark as could be, stormy, whilst the rain lashed the panes. How wet he would have been but for that fly he brought, I thought ! It was so like him doing that. In such a case Bracy would have walked, rather than expose a girl to possible village gossip by his visit being known. But then *he* was different.

Pity some other brighter, happier girl than myself could not be loved by and love him. I could not, in the least ; much as I liked him.

So I sat on alone, a white, miserable, lonely figure,

till through the rain and wind and blackness came the chill stealing dawn. The last page of my love for Clair St. Leger had just been written in my heart or brain, or wherever we keep such memories, and while still freshly wet, as it were, I wanted to brood over it. The heart put him out for ever; the mind tried him and judged him again and again all through that night, admitting every plea, extenuating, almost forgiving, yet—yet worst of all *despising* this first, this now old love!

But both were sick and troubled, whilst my head burned with fever, and sleep seemed only a possibility of dreadful dreams.

I knew myself ill; yet Fulke Bracy was going away to-morrow, and if he spoke to me again I must know what was in my own mind. Almost till morning dawned, there was a battle in my soul. For, verily, it was a temptation. I hated poverty, the petty, grinding, daily miseries of reckoning how many half-pence in our altered circumstances I dared feel justified in spending, and the loss of so much that is pleasant and lovely in life; hated the thought of living on dear old Bee's scanty hoard—and yet what could I work at? What can such girls as I work at, that is not almost worse than struggling on at home?

Other people often marry without love, and get on very fairly well. Why not I? Nobody *could* like Fulke Bracy better, no one utterly respect him more; and then good-bye carking care for me and Rose and Bob; for our mother too, no doubt, if she would accept his aid. (This last was thought in the darkness of the later small hours, after Clair St. Leger's ghost had been buried.)

It drew towards dawn. . . .

"This man is so good and single-hearted, it would be a shame and a sin not to give him as much as he

gives in such a bargain," was the thought that grew with the growing light. . .

The cocks crew outside ; the world awakened ; there came a rush of returning vigour and life to all things with the rising of the sun, even to my sleepless, weary, troubled self. And then I knew my own mind.

"But are you sure of this?" asked Fulke later. We were standing together in the porch ; the warm sun reviving and invigorating grass and flowers and bushes, and all that had been laid low and wet with last night's storm.

How different a scene it was, such a soft, fair morning! How different a man this one who had just now again offered me all he had honestly earned, and himself who was worth far more ; not pressing or urging, but only kindly asking me to consider whether, in the time to come, he might not be allowed to care for me and for all my family.

No fine words ; no ill-timed expressions of his own inner feelings, which after last night's scene might have jarred upon me. After having urged his pleas in vain, he now ended in a tone of manly regret :

"I don't like to say much, now ; but it was impossible to go away and say nothing. Pleasance, my poor child, you are not fitted for a rough life ; I know no one less so. Even your little sister, Rose, would be far better able to endure privations."

"Mr. Fulke!—my kind friend of old—do you know that you were tempting me to do what my conscience declares would be a great wrong to you, for the sake of—money?"

"No, no, no. For the sake of the care, comfort, love, the happy life I would have hoped to give you" he returned, rather huskily.

Till then, we had both been speaking so calmly, dispassionately, any on-looker at even a short distance would never have guessed the subject of our discourse.

"Say, if I were to come back in six months, or a year; or even two years?" as I dolefully and slowly shook my head. "No? Could you not like me any better?"

"I have always liked you *so much*, that I don't believe it possible to like you any better," was my truthful answer. "Oh, why is it, I wonder, that one may respect and like a person above all others, and yet, and yet—"

"I know what you would say—yet cannot give them any warmer feelings. There is fate in it, I suppose. Well, good-bye, I will trouble you no more. Here is Miss Beaumanoir, too."

"How well you are looking, Pleasance, child! Quite a poppy painted on each cheek," said my grand-aunt.

"I think Miss Brown is looking far from well. Pray take care of her, or she will be ill," said Bracy, almost roughly.

Then my grand-aunt's old gig came to the door, with Bob's yellow colt, Dandelion, his only equine possession, harnessed thereinto.

"Hope you've made your will, sir?" grumbled old Tozer to the departing guest, as he kept Dandelion from making plunges at the sky. Tozer was a very burly, bearded old fellow with the slyest of eyes, and a growl so rude it was given credit for honesty.

"Oh, I'm giving him every chance of life by driving him myself, and we'll help to bury him decently if he does get his neck broken," cried Bob cheerily, scrambling up to his dangerous perch. "Now, Bracy, come along. . . . Look out, man, for goodness sake! One would think you didn't care if you were smashed up."

For Bracy had got in as coolly, and even absently, as if the golden steed was not endeavouring to spill both the gig's occupants before bolting wildly down the drive.

When my brother returned, he found me alone, lying on the hard old sofa in a dark corner of the dismal parlour; trying to rest my sadly aching head on the horsehair bolster.

"What a terrible fool you have been, Pleasance!" So said Master Bob, striding up, and looking down upon me with a deep frown upon his ruddy young face.

That was all he could find to say to me, he, my best-beloved of those now left on earth; and yet he saw me so disconsolate and wretched.

"Oh, don't, Bob! I know—I know! but it would have been wrong to do anything else," was my utterly illogical and miserable answer; then weakly added: "How did you guess?"

"Guess! Am I gone stark staring mad too?" replied he, Irish fashion, question for question. "As if he was likely to offer to go shares in the farm with me for nothing. He told me of it last night. Rather not—!"

"But you won't accept it, Bob? You could not now," cried I, raising myself on my elbow.

"Shan't I, though? He spoke again to me this morning about it. Do you imagine because you have thrown away your chances in life, that I am to do the same? . . . Not if I know it," slowly enunciated the youth; with a determination and purpose of manner that the humble March Hare, standing yesterday with his head on mother earth and his heels to the sky, had certainly been devoid of owning.

He added in a wildly explanatory manner, making for the door:

"I did haggle about accepting him, on your account;

hoping devoutly, with my heart in my mouth, that Bracy would not go and take me at my word. But he's a grand fellow. He said we two had been such friends in the old days at Dartmoor, that I was to consider it a settled matter, for the sake of auld lang syne."

"Auld lang syne! Auld lang syne!" The words haunted me and rang in my ears all that day.

The next night I was so ill, that for many a night and day afterwards I knew no one. The burthen of sickness had been brought by me upon my poor grand-aunt's little household, strained enough in its resources already; by me who was so grieved before to give her the burthen of supporting us. The grief that I should have done this tormented me in my intervals of returning consciousness; and, maybe, the feverish longing to recover quickly delayed recovery.

CHAPTER XXXV.

DARTMOOR! Dartmoor! . . .

One year and four months have gone by like an ill dream, since that strange visit of St. Leger to the Barn, and my miserable illness. I felt grown calmer; more restful in spirit; and now thankful for small mercies and daily petty joys perhaps before overlooked. I, Pleasance Brown, had grown thinner, and lost some of the former good looks those who loved me had seen in me.

I was shabbily dressed, in an old, old gown of the Stoke days—had no prospect of another; no vague

hopes either now of indefinite work to be paid for substantially ; no airy castles ; no golden dreams. Half-pence and I had become intimately acquainted ; and how far they would go, or how far one could go without them, was a matter in which few persons of far greater experience could surpass me.

And yet all this did not torment me now. An older, poorer, plainer girl, in a worn dress and coarse straw hat, I was lying full-length among the bracken on a Dartmoor hill-side ; only troubling myself how to lay my head more comfortably now and again on my out-stretched arm ; only thinking what a sweet smell rose up from the warm earth that summer afternoon ; idly and utterly drinking into my soul the beauty of—

The sun, and the large air, and the sweet earth,
And the hours that hum like fireflies on the hill
As they burn out and die, and the broad heaven,
And the small clouds that swim and swoon i' the sun,
And the small flowers.

Away downwards, at some little distance, if one just raised a sleepy head on one elbow and blinked in the sunlight, could be seen the brown thatched roofs of Wheatfield Farm, and its comfortable barns, linnhay, and such-like outhouses. Without any effort, some of its embosoming, thereto pertaining, oak-trees, that grew up the hill-side, were visible cutting the blue sky ; or a circling flock of its pigeons would mount a little way above the friendly eaves and gables.

But it was too much trouble, generally, to keep one's eyelids open this delicious, lazy afternoon ; so mine blinked and closed softly, letting only a soft, rosy light through on the sight, till I was aware of a rustle overhead among the fern-stalks, and saw the hem of a familiar, dark-red cotton gown near my face.

"Is that you?" said I lazily, as if it *could* be any one else, looking up at Mrs. Gladman; adding, with a well-pleased tone of thorough enjoyment, "Are you come to talk to me? I am very glad of it."

Down sank that most excellent of women, as gently as a feather-bed, beside me. How marvellously comely and little changed she still was; one of those persons who grow old imperceptibly and almost delightfully.

"Yes, Pleasance, dear. Now, what have you got pleasant to tell me?"

"Well, that the air on Dartmoor is fresher and sweeter than anywhere else in the world; and in summer Wheatfield Farm is the most delightful spot on earth—except one—dear old Stoke!"

"Come! that is very nice," said the dear voice overhead in gratified tones. "But why only in summer, Pleasance, my child? I have lived thirty years now at the Farm, and can honestly declare to never having felt myself isolated or dull in the winters; and so would you feel too, I believe, in the same position."

The even, musical voice which since childhood had always seemed to me to breathe the truest spirit of *motherliness* I could imagine, laid no stress on the words; yet, though only back at Wheatfield since two days, I knew the hidden meaning. In the same position? As wife and mistress down at the old brown house!

"How nice it is to feel so sleepy, and have nothing at all to do," I murmured, closing my eyes again with secret baseness of evasion. For, mercifully, Mrs. Gladman was too dear and kind to think me rude, or to suspect guile.

"Then sleep, my child. You came here only to enjoy yourself, remember; when you wake up, you shall tell me all you have been doing this past year and a half. Meanwhile, I like to sit still, too, and think."

So there was silence between us for a time. The sun smote still warmly down on the hill-side, but the giant bracken fronds closed softly all round us two. The sweet breeze on this little upper world tempered the heat and was fragrant with gorse and heather scents, wafted from hill beyond hill, upheaving their shoulders behind each other to the horizon ; each crowned with some strange-shaped out-cropping rocks—the *tors* of Devon ; and forming a natural rampart to the grand, unbroken, violet sweeps of moorland that lay in solitude in the heart of the hills.

But even as I thus lay dreamily, my dear old friend's last words set me a-musing, and by-and-by there grew therefrom a sadness almost akin to unreasonable bitterness in my mind. Little she knew thereof, sitting placid and serene above me, who lay seemingly as untroubled as any mountain nymph.

Tell her something about the past year and a half of my life !

Could she guess nothing of what the past months had been in bitterness to me and my mother ; or how unlike her own easy, tranquil farm-life ? Truly, my occasional letters had told little of our struggles with deprivation, penury, almost want. My mother was so proud she would never have forgiven me for so revealing our position, even to my god-mother, the old friend of the Brown family, she had so sweetly patronised. But, lying there, I felt inwardly surprised that Mrs. Gladman did not seem to understand it *without* the telling. That would be a true ideal friendship, which should *know* by a communicated flash of thought ; and sympathise without agonising us afresh to describe one by one all the bleeding wounds or daily pin-pricks, the soreness caused by friends who disappointed our reasonable expectations,

or the terrible nothingness of our lives since some one of our best-beloved has gone before us into the world of light.

Yes ; it had been truly a bad year and a half, which my mother and I had spent together in that mean little house on Camden Hill. But this much had come of it, that we had grown, if not into the perfect and rare unison I had enjoyed with my father—ah ! that relationship could never come on earth for me again !—yet to understand each other. My mother was altogether devoted to Beau, now ; lived, even pinched for him—and what a change for her was there ! She *toiled* for him, sewing at nights to gain a scanty pay at genteel ladies' embroidery, till her lovely eyes were dimmed and weary ; not that she ever would own it. And I, though by no means sharing her feeling of devotion—for how seldom does the idol of one human being seem worthy of such worship to another !—yet admired her beautiful daily self-sacrifice which, at times, rose to unconscious heroism.

It was also an example to see how, though greatly broken in spirit, from terrible grief and change of fortune, she never once uttered a complaint. How too, for Beau's sake, she tried to have a smile always ready for the wandering artist when he returned to the poor home he scorned. And withal how the former mistress of Stoke kept all her old elegance of manner, trying always undauntedly to disguise poverty under refinement.

After my illness at the Barn, now a year and a half ago, I had gone to London and stayed with my mother. She had written that she could now manage her purse, so as to have me ; and would be *glad* that I should come. It would make our little home more cheerful for Beau. Good Mrs. Gladman had asked me at the same

time down to Wheatfield Farm for change of air. My mother never knew I received and refused that kind offer.

Truly, once with mother, she seemed as self-reliant as ever in her gentle, proud way, asking no sympathy from me, only obedience; still ordering all our affairs without taking me into her counsel or almost confidence. To Beau alone she unbent; was as wax to his wayward wishes, steel to endure without a frown or murmur what they cost her. Thinking of Dartmoor and my unknown sacrifice so apparently useless, I had been secretly inclined to be morbid, and pity myself that weary London summer; but as the days grew hotter and dustier, I came to perceive my presence silently comforting to my poor mother. "By the world forgot," did not quite mean with her forgetting *it*. She had expected more from former town friends. Not for herself—no! but some small kindnesses to me, her child; much warm patronage of Beau; orders, invitations even to her darling who had been so sought after in society hitherto; and—so little came. She never repined, but wrapped our mourning as a cloak over our poverty, and bore it in silence; but *then* I felt she was grateful to have me.

So the summer passed, and a cold, pinching winter came. Poverty must be less a trouble in hot countries, where one eats less and requires less of clothing.

Then came another spring, and another hearty letter from Wheatfield, inviting us both. It was the time when swallows come—the time when all living creatures seem to want change, and a life of joy; oh! how I longed for the peace and plenty of the Farm, its deep woods, and the exquisitely cold brooks that came babbling and leaping down from the moors. But money was not; even for that simple visit. My mother said in her gentle way,

covering inflexible resolve, that it could not be done. Beau had been extravagant in winter, what with fitting up his studio and giving little entertainments to his gay artist-friends. He had gone with some of these at Whitsuntide on a sketching-tour in Normandy; it was a necessity for him to have more than one trip a year, he declared; therefore we two must pinch yet more to make up for it. And so we did through the sweltering heat of June and July; bearing the close days, the stuffy, small rooms; and by my mother's express wish, never betraying to Mrs. Gladman the real cause of our excuses and refusal.

And to tell the truth, I did feel hard then against poor Beau; even dared to speak out my mind, for once. But my mother silently looked at me, and turned away with her head drooped. She knew it; she felt it, too, yet would not complain. That melted my heart, and so I overcame in that one moment my old spirit of bitterness, being lifted up by her example.

At this moment in my meditations, some movement betrayed my wakefulness, and Mrs. Gladman's clear voice said, as if pursuing her own placid vein of thought:

"Well, dear, after all my efforts to get you down here I *am* glad to have you at the Farm once more." Her large, soft hand covered mine that had sought it caressingly, and she continued: "Yes, it is strange how we plan things, and they all turn out quite differently. Now I wished to have you here with us last year, and after all it was dear little Rose who came."

"And made an excellent *locum tenens* in your heart," I smiled. For indeed Rose had, without perhaps her own knowledge or that of my good god-mother, done more than keep my place warm for me; but had nestled herself into the innermost corner of Mrs. Gladman's affections. She had spent much of her time here last

year, alternating her visits between Wheatfield Farm and wherever Sir Dudley and Alice might be, whether in London or at Broadhams; and when two days ago the coach set me down at Chagford, it was Rose who met me smiling and crying:

"At last!—how thin you look, and pale! Why, we thought you were never coming. I have been here three weeks, and it has been so nice."

"You are not to imagine that even Rose (much as I love the dear child!) could possibly make me less fond of you, Pleasance," put in Mrs. Gladman, with flurried eagerness. "No, no; of course my god-daughter can never be quite replaced by any one. Only, you see, dear, neither John nor I were quite satisfied to have her at first instead of you; but really the way she used to be up at six in the morning to see the butter made Devonshire fashion!—and she knows now how to manage a large dairy as well as myself. Then how well she made the jam last year, and insisted on learning even to cure the bacon." Mrs. Gladman heaved gently with inward laughter at the recollection, remembering herself to add pointedly, however: "But, still, don't think for a moment, dear, I could ever be really fonder of her than of you. You must not be jealous."

"Certainly not." Yet it struck me that when people are so eager to disclaim a supposition that nobody made, there must be, as people say, "something in it."

"Rose has been amusing us so much with stories of the time she spent with Alice—indeed, I ought to get used to saying Lady Digges—in London, this season," went on Mrs. Gladman, smiling to herself, evidently piqued thereto by the thought of little Rose and her ways and sayings. "She told me she often felt like a brown sparrow among fine canaries, and longed by way

of change to fly down into the street and look for her own crumbs. And she said, too, the only part of her London season she really enjoyed, was when she had been able to slip off to Camden Hill and see you."

"Dear Rose! yes; she came as often as she could. Even once or twice she gave up some fine parties to see us, so that mother was quite vexed with her on finding it out."

"But, Pleasance, it seems to me very hard that you should have had none of these amusements; you are young, too."

"No, no; it was quite fair," I broke in. "You know Alice had a perfect right to choose between us; and it was quite as much as we could expect for her to take out one. Oh, she did ask me to some of her large At Homes, but I did not care to go in Cinderella's old clothes—Sir Dudley insisted, you know, on providing dresses for Rose; and so . . . Yes, it is best to keep to one's own line of life, and not let oneself be tempted to hanker after impossibilities."

Mrs. Gladman's hand covered mine.

"My poor dear! You have had longings lately then, and I had stupidly fancied that a quiet life of culture and perhaps dulness would quite content you. So natural—at your age."

"No; oh no. Don't mistake me," I nervously laughed, trying thereby to keep down a sudden most incomprehensible weakness. "Only hankering after the old life at Stoke, and my father and Bob—and Rose," on which the laughter broke utterly down into a fit of sobbing. Mrs. Gladman caressed my head and drew it on her lap, but said never a word; that was her manner; but she made it so comforting by the very way she held one's hand.

"It seemed so lonely, sometimes," I explained apologetically, as my best of friends continued her soothing ministrations. "But, you see, my mother did not *wish* Rose to come much to us. She said, and so did Alice, that it was everything for Rose not to miss any chance of being well settled in life. Rose has always been my mother's darling, you know, and so . . ."

"I know." To my surprise Mrs. Gladman's voice sounded decidedly disturbed. "Yes, it must have been lonely. Well! now you are here, dear, I do hope my pleasant child will have a pleasant time. And to tell you a shrewd guess of mine, Pleasance, my pet, ever since last summer when she was so much with us, it has struck me that Rose is on the high-road to a good match."

"What do you mean? Do tell me!"—sitting bolt upright.

"Has Rose never mentioned meeting any old friend?" was the playful question.

"Only—let me see . . . No old friend excepting Mr. Bracy. No—none."

"Well! Don't you like him?" meaningly.

Down I sank suddenly again; and began plucking up little bits of grass. "Ye—es. I always liked him very much indeed; but you don't mean that . . ."

"Why, yes; I do," nodded Mrs. Gladman cheerfully. "Fulke Bracy sought her out a great deal for *him*; and when one day I praised her to him (judiciously, my dear, for I would not meddle for worlds, though most anxious to help if one could), he did tell me he felt an especial interest in Rose, and that . . . Well, in fact, he said even more; but as he is rather reticent he would not wish me to betray his secrets," with a pleasant laugh; for what elderly woman does not like being taken somewhat into

a young man's confidences? And though middle-aged to me, Fulke Bracy was a boy to her.

Then, as I sat silent, she went on. "Well, dear! You seem meditating so earnestly over my little bit of news; but I know you are glad of it in heart, by the sweet expression in your eyes, though your mouth looks so grave. Ah! Pleasance, you see how well I know your thoughts" (as a smile despite myself broke out on my features). "You do think it would be a happy match."

"Very!" with emphasis.

"Then my mind is relieved," said the dear woman. "Not to force confidences, or betray any, Pleasance, I did know when Fulke went to see you at the Barn, two years ago, what he wanted. He only told me enough to make me understand he was not trying to supplant my son John in any underhand way; after the poor fellow had enlisted his services in vain at Broadhams—you cold-hearted child!"

"Oh, John did not much mind," I laughed awkwardly, yet feeling less confused with John's mother than I might with any other under such circumstances. "He liked the pheasant-shooting there so immensely, and the cook! Oh, you bad woman, you simply talked and persuaded him into believing he liked me. You know you did. He never was in love with me one bit."

"My dear, indeed, John is one of those men who would never seem violently in love with any girl; never. But he has such a fund of calm, domestic affection, and steady, strong liking. Believe me, after marriage with him *the rest would follow*. Oh, I wish you would take a fancy to John!" urged poor Mrs. Gladman, quite embarrassed by my home-thrust, and looking at me rather plaintively. On which we both with one accord went off into a hearty fit of laughter. Dear me, what

good that laugh did me ! What a pleasure it is to be with people who are light-hearted as well as wise and experienced, and who don't go about the world carrying their coffins on their backs.

I felt quite cheered again ; so seemed she. We rose to go down-hill to the Farm ; for at this evening hour she liked to be in the farmyard and see all her animals well fed and cared for before night. Then, as we scattered a nibbling flock of sheep who had apparently made up their minds we meant to sit still all the evening there, and now ran helter-skelter before us, she said :

" We will say no more about this, my dear Pleasance ; for you only came here to be made happy. Whatever your heart tells you to decide on will always be right in my eyes, and yourself no less dear to me. Oh ! I would not tempt or persuade any girl in such a matter for worlds—though of course I *do* know my own son so well, *that* is a different matter." This was a saving clause to her conscience, to which, secretly amused (for I was growing wiser now in understanding characters), I nodded acquiescence. Good soul ! She talked so honestly and seriously of not interfering in affairs of the heart ; had she only lived more in society, what a matchmaker she would have been ! Even now she returned to the subject of Fulke Bracy and Rose. " You know when he bought the Artist's Cottage last summer, that his poor mother used to live in, and fitted it up so exquisitely, I thought there was more in it than met the eye. John noticed it too (John is very sharp, my dear !). He said two of the rooms were evidently meant for a lady, they are so beautifully fitted up, but not lived in."

" Rose ought to be very happy," said I absently.

As we left the hill with its sweet breezes, the short

upland grass and grazing sheep, I lingered to take a last look before descending into Featherbed Lane. This was simply a winter water-course whose bed alternated in its steep descent between rocks and rolling gravel, while the Devonshire hedges were so high on either side that nowhere could a view be had, except when one stopped thankfully at a gate to lean thereon and take breath. Said Mrs. Gladman, as I gazed round, taking a last bird's-eye sweep of gorge and glen, of hill and violet moor outspread, to the rising of the horizon :

"Talking of marriages, I always meant to ask you about that ill-starred match of Mr. St. Leger's. Is it true his wife deceived him, and that she had no money?—served him right after all, for marrying a woman who might have been his mother."

"No, no," I interrupted, anxious to speak in all fairness. "But she was always fond of gambling, and so, as the most exciting way of indulging the passion, she had invested her all in a dozen wild schemes. Last summer, when there was that great panic in the City, you know (I don't understand it, but ever so many people were ruined, and everything was wrong in stocks and shares, I believe), well, she was ruined, too! They were just back from their honeymoon, and had not even been at Stoke."

"And never have since, of course. What a pity that Fulke Bracy had just spent so much money on this Artist's Cottage; and—and—on other things!"

"On Bob's farm at the Barn," thought I rather sadly to myself, knowing well enough why she hesitated. Aloud I added: "Yes, poor Mr. Bracy! He would so gladly have bought Stoke, no doubt. Well, it is in the market still, for they say times are bad for selling country houses; especially one so far from any town or

railroad, or what most people think make a country residence 'desirable.' Let us hope he may still make money enough to get his wish, for it *was* tantalising."

"Was it not?—and yet he never complained one word!" exclaimed Mrs. Gladman, speaking of her favourite with such eager sympathy, my heart warmed to her. "Well, yes, he is becoming rich certainly; still, to buy two places in two years besides his share in the Barn Farm would be, I fear—well, *too* much; not that I meant any pun. And I am quite relieved, dear Pleasance, that you don't mind giving up Fulke Bracy to Rose; for although a girl may not quite wish to marry a man herself, still when he has paid her attention and all that, she often feels hurt a little when he goes after somebody else."

Which was a rather true remark, it seemed to me, on the part of Mrs. Gladman.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

Two evenings later, I was idling in the untidy, picturesque Devonshire farmyard, watching my god-mother's housewifely figure as she dispensed corn among a fluttering, cackling group of cocks and hens, gray goslings, galinis, and turkey-poults. How pretty it was, as I looked around from my seat on an old moorstone trough that had rested under its tiny thatched pump-shed while generations of Gladmans had lived in the warm, brown homestead in front! Gray moorstone buildings of all

sizes stood around, with brown thatched roofs, each seeming heavier than the other, and adorned with various growths of coloured lichens, houseleek, or tiny ferns, according to their respective age.

One side of the court-yard was bounded by a wall, whether originally made of mud or rubble I never knew; but it, likewise, was topped by a funny little thatched roof of its own, above which again rose cherry branches delicately outlined against the evening sky. From behind the wall came voices singing together, that of a man and a maid, in a measured slow lilt. Mrs. Gladman flung all her corn down in a heap.

“Why! there are John and Rose. Come and join them, Pleasance, dear; they will be glad to have you, I am sure.”

We picked our way among the swine-troughs and the black grunting herd around them, and down the rough slope of the yard by the brown duck-pond to the garden-door. Inside, among the hedges of sweet-peas, hiding plots of humbler vegetables, the cobblestoned paths and straight borders of trailing nasturtium, hollyhocks, pinks, and all such autumn flowers, were set a few tall, spreading fruit-trees. Under the largest of these John Gladman was slowly swinging Rose back and forward with an air of vast enjoyment, while they trolled out together the old Devonshire song:

Oh, I went to the fair with a heart all so merry,—

Sing hey down, ho down, derry down dee;

And I bought a gay ribbon as red as a cherry,

For the girl I loved best, and who vowed to love me.

I returned from the fair gaily whistling and singing,

My true lover's-knot I in triumph was bringing,

But it was not for *me* that I heard the bells ringing—

Sing hey down, ho down, derry down dee.

I found she was false, tho' she promised me fairly,—
 Sing hey down, ho down, derry down dee ;
 For women, I trow, are like weathercocks, rarely
 They fix on one point, so coquettish they be.
 My true lover's-knot I away was now flinging,
 I've done with the sex, I live single and singing,
 Oh, it was not for me that I heard the bells ringing,—
 Sing hey down, ho down . . .

John's voice, that had taken quite a pathetic depth of sound at the last lines, suddenly broke down short as both perceived us. Rose sprang out of her seat as lightly as a kitten.

"Come along, Pleasance dear, and have a swing : it's such fun," she cried, her eyes dancing.

"Yes, do, dear," urged my god-mother from behind. "John has given Rose a turn, so now he will want to give you yours. Won't you, John?"

"Oh, yes: won't you, Pleasance?" echoed the young man, blushing with an air of confusion, to my surprise, and looking at me with round, pleading eyes.

"I never did care to swing, thank you, John: it makes me giddy."

"Perhaps—would you—do you care to come and see the pigs fed? No?" (as I gave a little dissenting shake of the head, much preferring the pretty garden and Mrs. Gladman's stout arm to which I held).

"Well, Rose will come, anyhow. She always does, don't you, Rose?"

"Not this evening, my boy," interrupted his mother with a sunny, meaning smile. "I want both girls to go up the lane as far as the stile and see what is coming; or whether anything is coming along the road to Wheatfield Farm."

"You expect something important, then? No, some one!—I can see it in your face. Who is it?"

What is it? Oh, you dear mysterious soul, do tell us," cried Rose and I, assailing her with questions. But Mrs. Gladman would not answer a word; but fairly ran away, though scant of breath, only calling back:

"Do as I tell you both now. Go up the lane to the stile—and wait till you see something."

Whereupon she vanished cleverly behind the shippen, and Rose and I were left looking at each other. Lo and behold!—John had gone too. Marvelling much what this mystery might mean, we both concluded it would be best to do our good hostess's bidding, so took our way up the steep winding lane between the farm-meadows to the stile at the top. The high banks of the lane were all thick-set with flowers and ferns, and made still higher by a wildly luxuriant growth a-top of holly, mountain ash, with glorious clusters of scarlet berries flaming from afar, all interwoven with bronze trails of brier and bramble and glistening green wreaths of bryony and bindweed, flung from branch to branch with all Nature's almost wasteful prodigality of beauty in happy Devonshire. Nevertheless, as grumblers say, the only views to be had in them is over every gate. Luckily, we were bidden to wait up at the stile, where was a lovely prospect of the valley.

"I can't think who it could be, except perhaps Mr. Bracy. He might be coming," said Rose, with a rather conscious look, as we wandered together.

"Ah!" said I musingly, "I wonder; could it be?" Then, after a pause, with a careless inquiring air, "How do you really like Mr. Bracy, now that you have seen so much more of him?"

"Oh, very, *very* much," returned Rose, with emphasis. "I am sure that the more you knew him, the

better you would like him too, Pleasance, dear. He is so kind, so true; *he* would never change."

"Yes, I dare say he is all that," I answered, in a dream.

"How coldly you say it! I declare you don't deserve to be called a friend of his," exclaimed Rose pettishly. Slipping down from her seat on the stile, being like a bright little bit of perpetual motion, she began flitting about to gather flowers for the supper-table. I, less practical, still sat on the topmost bar, inwardly ashamed of myself, for it was quite true that all warmth and life had seemed to die out of my voice in speaking of Fulke Bracy. Ah! the truth was, that during the year and a half of my dreary life in London, I had been silly enough to think in that loneliness of Fulke Bracy's attachment as always enduring: to turn to it in thought as the one cheering point of light steadily shining over the twilight waste marshes and dawnless gray cheerlessness of life. A year and a half! . . . How could I forget a man's fancy must change? Nay, to be fair, his heart would require something warmer than the mere cool offer I had last made him at the Barn, of friendship—at a distance.

Ay, we were fools, we Maries twain, and thought
To be into the summer back again,
And see the broom glow in the golden world,—
The gentle broom on hill.

Then I tried to examine myself as to how I really felt on this surprising new state of things being so suddenly revealed. Without doubt, I had not wished to marry Fulke Bracy when we parted at the Barn that wet, sunny March morning; yet was assuredly conscious of a secret dog-in-the-manger feeling having so taken me

aback, that I was stricken dumb on the hill-side when Mrs. Gladman told her news. Fulke and Rose ! It was the new strangeness of the combination that had so affected me, now when I came to think of it ; for it was impossible that I should grudge my best friend to my dear little sister, or her to him. But then, it was almost irritating, in a small way, to remember how Rose had laughed at him in those days ; said he was too lofty for her, with his gentle manner recalling a long line of ancestors, and the rather haughty carriage of his head suggesting the pride of fallen fortunes. And in those days, too, he had never seemed to think of Rose at all ; except, indeed, as my sister. While now . . . ?

What use, Pleasance Brown, in tormenting oneself thinking over the all that *was* ? Be brave, and look what *is* in the face ! Therewith, I swallowed a large sigh, and with one supreme effort shut out secret thoughts of Fulke, thenceforth with all my heart renouncing him to my dear little sister, with as much humble cheerfulness as may be ordered at will.

Then, while so sitting, the calm beauty of the summer evening stole into my soul with peace ; and so, moment by moment, any still jarring sense of discord was hushed and laid to rest.

How fair it all was ! Above, the large, cool, blue evening sky, and all around gorges and hills, softly veiled in haze and shadow. On the further side of the road, one gate in the thick hedge gave a peep of a field in which poppies flamed amongst dark-red clover, making a perfect jubilee of colour. From this other gate whereon I sat, was a view of the river winding far below, between flat buttercup meadows ; where midway the miller's red cows were standing knee-deep in the ford by the stepping-stones. Now and again, some of the villagers came down

the lane, or a tired farmer jogging home on his pony. And they all wished us "good evening" in the friendly Devonshire way. Presently Rose tripped back to me, her hands, that had been busy as usual, full of flowers and ferns; then she suddenly exclaimed:

"Look, look! there is a little cloud of dust far off on the Moreton Road. Don't you see it?"

"No. I can't see anything at all. . . . Look again, Rose. This is like—Sister Anne, Sister Anne, do you see anything coming?"

Rose perched herself beside me, and gazed at the stony road winding like a white ribbon down an opposite hill, that was studded with fir-trees and strewn with boulders.

"Yes. There is certainly something coming . . . two somethings . . . two black specks. Wait till they come down below us, into the valley."

For the road, after dipping into the glen and crossing the river, wound by the Teign side for a little way under our hill; and so any passers-by were visible till, on beginning the steep zigzagging ascent of the lane, they would be lost to view between its high banks, until close upon us.

"Now they are down at the bridge!" I said, straining my eyes. "What is it, Rose—a dog-cart? Yes, it must be a dog-cart: what smart visitor can be coming in that? And surely there is a rider behind."

Rose, who had the longest eyesight I ever knew, was silently looking. She burst now into a strange little laugh.

"What is it? Don't be so impatient, Pleasance! Why, it's a *butcher's cart*, my dear! 'That is all and nothing more,' as the song of the raven says—ha, ha."

"Is that all?" said I indifferently, still looking too,

though my misty brown vision could distinguish nothing clearly, albeit my eyes were large enough. "But who is the man riding, do you think?"

"Well, he is keeping close company with the butcher's cart, so birds of a feather should flock together. Ha, ha; fancy our watching for a spring-cart."

"I'll watch no more. The Moreton butcher and some farmer, no doubt. I wonder they amuse you, Rose?"

So saying, I began with dignity to arrange our flowers into artistic bunches; though Rose, who had jumped down, kept watching the nearest corner of the lane with head outstretched and dancing eyes. Presently, we heard the wheels grinding, and curious ejaculations.

"Hi! Hi! Let me pass you, I say. I can see the girls sitting on the style up there, and I want to have the first of it with them."

"No, no, you bad boy! The wheel is up on the bank already; don't upset us; you'll kiss them soon enough. Get up, Lazybones, get up. Bracy, dig my umbrella into the old mare's ribs, will you? Merciful powers! what a lane!"

Next instant, before I could collect my scattered thoughts, being always slow in speech and movement, even as I gazed with expectation and wonder there was a clatter! and round the corner with a rush came a big yellow horse on which sat a big young man with a rosy lop-sided face and yellow hair. Rose screamed aloud with ecstasy; most likely I did too; for with a scramble the rider had dismounted, and I found my cheeks heartily rasped by Bob's callow whiskers.

"Oh, Bob, Bob!" was all I could ejaculate, between laughing and crying.

"Isn't it jolly, eh?" was all he could find of wisdom to answer, whilst I patted his arm and he continued the hugging process. Then looking up I saw that the butcher's cart had reached us and stopped, its occupants surveying us with deeply-interested amusement. I could not help laughing out loud at sight of them, for surely a stranger pair never sat in such a vehicle—my grand-aunt Miss Beaumanior, and Mr. Bracy! Behind them, the cart was piled with portmanteaux and a significant-looking bag from which protruded a shin of beef; in front of which they sat with a calm air of proprietorship. Fulke was faultlessly well-dressed as usual; Aunt Bee perhaps looking more wizened and witch-like in her everlasting old garments, but her black eyes as kind and quick as ever.

A right merry meeting and hand-shaking that was in the dusty road; while cross questions and crooked answers were interchanged with lively fire.

"Come for a real good visit, Pleasance!" cried the March Hare, waving his arms wildly like a windmill. "Oh, rather—what a fool you are!—be quiet, do." (This was to Dandelion, his horse, who had plunged; not inexcusably).

"But we're none of us going to stay with you at the Farm, so don't flatter yourselves," put in our grand-aunt, eyeing us with an amused satisfaction quite wicked in such an old woman.

"Don't be distressed. They will only be half-a-mile off at my cottage. You know I have become a landed proprietor down here in a small way, Miss Brown," said Fulke Bracy, laughing at our depressed faces.

"Why, you'll want the spare rooms at the Farm for all the other guests. When are the revelries to begin, Pleasance?"

"Oh, who else is coming, Bob, dear? Not surely mother?" in a joyful tone, remembering a curious restraint in Mrs. Gladman's manner, when, on the coming of the last letter from the poky little house on Camden Hill, I had grieved myself over my mother's inscrutable silence as to her plans for the autumn; having hoped Alice would have invited her for country air to Broadhams.

"The mother? Of course she is coming," echoed Bob; "and so you knew nothing about it all; oh, glorious! Why, it's all been got up for *you*. Even your friend Amy Pawlett coming too. Oh, my eye! what a beauty of a trout rose just as we crossed the bridge."

"Yes, child," said my grand-aunt, breaking in. "Your god-mother, who is a woman after my own heart, thought you had been dull for so long, that she settled this with us all, and bound us over to secrecy. Now, good children, march on to the Farm. I want some supper."

"And what of Amy Pawlett?" I asked, still bewildered, as we went chattering homewards to the Farm.

"That I can explain," put in Rose. "You know that Mrs. Gladman came up to town last May, for a week, to see the Academy and buy a summer bonnet. Well, she paid Alice and me a visit one day when the Pawletts were there, and Amy began talking so affectionately of you that Mrs. Gladman invited her there and then for August. Of course she was delighted; but Lady Pawlett would never have given her so long a holiday (now Charlotte is gone into a sisterhood), except that her ladyship wanted to be off to Homburg with as little expense as possible, and preferred taking her maid to her daughter."

"Poor Amy! Yes, she came twice to see me in London; Lady Pawlett was not pleased about it. But why all this should be done for me, is more than I can understand," I murmured, feeling really rather overcome at such unexpected goodness.

"No, very likely you can't; but your friends can," said Fulke Bracy, with his old kind voice.

Next moment Rose turned, and as her eyes met his there was such a mutually understanding glance between them that my heart—in spite of previous good resolutions—felt quite sick. But only for an instant or two! no more. Very soon I was laughing with the rest, and we went homewards all crowded round the butcher's cart, while Fulke Bracy led Lazybones, my grand-aunt's old mare.

"And where did you beg, or borrow, or steal your triumphal chariot?" Rose pertly asked.

"We hired it, miss, at Moreton, where my old gig broke down, and a very good conveyance too, for a lady ought to feel herself such if she rides in a wheelbarrow; besides, we obliged both the butcher and Mrs. Gladman by bringing over that beef for her," quoth my grand-aunt, with a grimace that expressed defiance of formalities. "But, Bracy, I still think it a great pity you would not let me go two miles out of our way to see the Ownalls. You are too proud, my good man."

"Be both my judge and advocate, Miss Pleasance," said that proud man, laughing as he turned to me. "I assure you, I was delighted to please Miss Beaumanoir by visiting several local magnates, whilst we were in the old gig. But to drive up to the door of a marquis, and the lord-lieutenant of the county, in a butcher's cart; *that* really was a call I thought uncalled for."

The Farm now came in sight, and Mrs. Gladman

standing by the gate, her whole face and person exhaling a gentle *aura* of welcome. Behind her, John seemed so brimming over with smiles that his superfluous satisfaction had to vent itself in extraordinary contortions of the shoulders, as he held the top bar with both hands.

Through the trim garden-plot we all trooped, up the cobble-stoned path into the cool stone entry of the old dwelling-house. The doors of the pleasant parlours to the right and left were set invitingly open, as were the windows; so that moorland freshness and heather scents seemed to pervade the whole household. And what a glorious supper we had together that evening! How pleasantly we chatted outside afterwards in the summer dusk, till, later again, the three new-comers went away to the Artist's Cottage; as Fulke's little home had been called since, thirty years ago, the first wandering artist who ever found out the charms of the valley had stayed there awhile and sketched, to the rustic wonderment.

"Good-night," said he to me as we stood together under the starry sky at the gate. "But why not come with us a little way? Your sister is coming"—with a slight emphasis.

"Yes, Rose will go; but I think I had better stay at home to-night," was my evasively-murmured reply, withdrawing my hand.

"At home," he echoed.

"Yes," said Mrs. Gladman behind me, "I am glad dear Pleasance looks on the Farm as home."

It is something to be ashamed of when one sister cannot stand by, and see the happiness of another, without heaviness of heart, and a wish to turn away and not look upon it. Well, to-morrow; yes, certainly to-morrow, I would be stronger. This one evening, at least, let me stay alone and fight out the fight that must be won

against the selfishness and envy that kept uprising in my soul.

The gay departing voices died away down the lane in the sweet darkness. Mrs. Gladman had left me to go indoors and give some orders to Mary Munch, her faithful coadjutor and cook. I was alone and thinking.

Those few words of my good god-mother's about my home being at Wheatfield Farm, were food enough for many thoughts.

Fulke Bracy's look at Rose, the meaning in his voice when he said *she* would go down the lane with them, was again before my eyes, sounded in my ears. My brain was in a whirl. How dreadful it is to feel the dull first workings of that sick pain of jealousy, affecting even the body through the brain, which may grow at last to such agonies! Who was it truly said, "The jealous are the damned"?

I laid my head down on the rail of the gate, and could have laughed at my own foolishness softly; but then I would very gladly have cried.

Well, well: recovering myself and staring away into the darkness, with a renewed wave of strength of purpose, facts must be looked in the face.

My god-mother wished me to stay at the Farm a long time; she wished me to think it my home. I should be indebted to John Gladman for bread and salt, and ought to be *glad* he gave it me, my mother being so miserably poor; for though, with the instincts of a lady, I longed to work at anything rather than be beholden to any one, what could the fingers of a lady do? Be a governess; a companion? I was hardly clever enough, accomplished enough, for either over-stocked class. A lady-help,—a children's caretaker? One's heart sank at the menial tasks, the

terrible change of daily life habits, companionship involved. Sew for livelihood, and still keep my own soul free? Had I not sewn and sewn in London till my eyes failed and my fingers were sore? and how little, alas! how little had been the gain to me, the ease to my mother!

But then in what a net the meshes of circumstances and affections would have involved me (with useless pain to all concerned), if, in the days to come, John Gladman were to come and ask me, in return for his goodness, and because of his great affection for his mother, and hers for me? Up the lane at that moment sounded returning voices; those of good John and my little sister. He was singing rather pathetically, having a fine manly voice,—

But it was not for *me* that I heard the bells ringing—

while Rose followed in a merry twitter, void of care,—

Sing, hey down, ho down, derry down dee !

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE revelries at the Farm had begun. The coach from Yeoford had set down in turn my mother and Amy Pawlett at the trim gate of Wheatfield Farm. A healthy, hearty spirit of happiness had taken such hold of us all, who had been now for some days regaled on home-made bread and Devonshire cream, on junkets, and the glorious moorland air, that our warmth of hospitable reception made both late-comers enter easily into the simple Arcadian life we had established: and feel made free of the noble oak-woods and brawling trout-streams in the valleys, the miles of heather moors with their jutting tors, the Druid cromlechs and stone-circles we others had all known and loved before.

Amy was no handsomer; still heavy and shy in manner and conversation, yet with such kindly gleams coming across her quiet features, now and again developing day by day into a steadily-increasing brightness while we all tried to cheer her, as it was a pleasure to see.

"That girl Amy is positively learning to be happy," said old Aunt Bee; then, with one of her keen black glances at me, whom she had silently been watching a good deal in the past few days: "Being melancholy is as much a habit as anything else, I believe; don't let it grow upon *you*, Pleasance."

"My dear aunt, I assure you, I try not," was my reply, rather startled.

"Humph! Yes, I believe you do try. I am sorry you have to try. It's a pity you could not have married Bracy when he wanted you! Well! I wonder at your taste, child; but there . . . I verily believe women can't help themselves as to likings."

We two sat alone together, though voices and laughter a little way off, told where the rest were fishing. But my old grand-aunt had crept away with unusual, almost suspicious, solitariness to this sunny nook, sheltered among boulders and trees. Her gait struck me as so lame and withered this day that I followed her, though she reiterated with a pleased impatience:

"Go back, Pleasance: go back to the other young folk. All I want is warmth for my old bones, and quiet."

Now I said after a pause—it seemed a long pause; a grasshopper had chirped and a bee gone by with a heavy-laden buzz: "I don't want to marry, Aunt Bee."

"Well, child; . . . you may be none the less happy for that. Look at me; live as I did."

Another silence. My lips curved with sorrowful amusement; how could I ever become like Aunt Bee?

A merry, mocking laugh sounded shrilly towards us from the nearest thicket, by which the river gurgled.

"Oh, Mr. Bracy, I've caught such a beauty; bigger than yours. John, come and put a worm on for me. They wriggle so—I don't like it."

"That little chit, Rose! How all the men make much of her!" said Aunt Bee, with a cynical glance at me.

"Not only the men; women too," I smiled, believing

she was trying to rouse my jealousy (and she had called up the tears indeed in my mind, if not in my eyes). For I had had such a cheery time of late, and dearly though I loved my little sister, it seemed hard it might not always be so. So I said: "Rose always was my mother's darling, and even with Mrs. Gladman, too——"

"Not with me, Pleasance," suddenly said the old lady, divining my thought, and laying a withered hand, not unlike a bird's claw, a moment on mine. "Of course, I am very fond of Rose; but it is human nature for a young soul like you to wish to be first with some one. You are first with me, if that is any consolation; for I fear your little sister has supplanted you. . . . But there! we won't speak about it, and here is your mother coming."

My mother moved gently towards us, picking her steps over the broken ground with dainty care. How much more fitted she seemed to stroll in trim garden-walks, or take a gentle drive for exercise behind high-stepping horses, paying due afternoon calls, or playing Lady Bountiful to the parish! Graceful as ever, yet her shoulders were now just a little bent; gentle as ever, yet her manner was often a trifle indifferent if not weary. Out on the wild moorland, or lower in the pleasant champaign country where the trout-streams brawled merrily through oak-wooded gorges, whilst we were all glad in the exhilaration of the mountain air, she moved among us like a being of another sphere. She was pleased to be with us all; no doubt felt the change from penury and the mean little London house to the plentiful hospitality of Wheatfield Farm as grateful, even more than was shown in her manner; yet her heart was far away, her mind absent.

She only really *lived* in the past ; at Stoke with our dear father in the dead life once more ; though all her present existence was devoted to the duties she owed her children. The one being whose even light doings or wishes could still rouse her to lively interest, was Beau, her idol—and now the pain of that maternal affection must too often have been greater than the pleasure.

As she came towards us at that moment, holding an open letter, her eyes were shining with pleasure ; her figure looked slim, almost girlish again in her widow's dress. All the fishing party followed her ; evidently she had imparted some great pleasure to them, and now came further to share it with us.

"Beau is coming !—dear boy, he has written inviting himself to the Farm ; the one being wanted to complete the happiness of our party," she exclaimed, looking round in glad expectation of confirming applause.

We all tried to look pleased at her pleasure :—otherwise, the expressions of universal joy were awkward. Only Amy Pawlett murmured, with a new light in her eyes such as I had never noticed there before :

"I am so glad ! Is it not delightful ?"

And Mrs. Gladman, with that calm, welcoming motherliness of hospitality which would have made her glad to extend her wings over, not only her friends, but her friends' friends again, if possible—to the extremest limits of both accommodation and kindly feeling, answered :

"Beaumanoir will be very welcome here, first, because he is his dear father's son ; and he could have few stronger claims on us ; and afterwards, when we know him better, I hope, for his own sake."

"Yes ; you will like him ; every one does ! He is too much a favourite, perhaps, for his own success in

life," my mother said with pride, yet a sigh. "He has been taking a trip in Brittany with some other artists, but did not like to settle to work again without running down here for a few days ; ours seemed such a pleasant party, from my letters. . . . A few more days' holiday will do him so much good," apoloisigly. "He will be here to-morrow evening."

My mother moved away, as if treading on air, since she had heard her good news. Mrs. Gladman and Amy Pawlett, kind souls, who both shared her gladness, from different motives, went too.

The rest of us looked at each other in silence. Then said old Miss Beaumanoir, tartly :

"Humph, so this fine London gentleman arrives to-morrow evening, does he ? . . . Well, children, let us all go off to-morrow morning, for a good ramble and picnic, before he spoils our fun."

We Browns, brother and sisters, gazed at our grand-aunt with the admiring air of guilty conspirators, who had not dared to speak out, as she did. Both Fulke Bracy and John, as men and no relations, looked discreetly away. But they, as well as we, hailed the idea with suspicious alacrity, notwithstanding.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

WHAT a warm and balmy September morning was that of our picnic !

We had gone into the great oak wood which covered the steeply-rising ground behind John Gladman's farm, and that spread irregularly down into little gorges and valleys in the heart of the hills. It was almost too warm still in the open glades, but the sunlight effects were charming, glinting through the trees, on brake and brambles, and glorious brown-gold bracken, in which the red Devon cattle stood shoulder-high here and there, chewing the cud, and staring at us with dark eyes of gentle wonder. We all gathered ferns or mountain-ash berries as we went, to adorn the Farm on our home-coming. This spoil was heaped high in the donkey-chaise, which held the three elder ladies and the provisions, and that soon looked like a moving bower.

On one side of the chaise went Bob, chaffing and teasing Aunt Bee ; on the other side demurely walked Amy, talking to my mother. Good girl, she was fondly and touchingly attentive to her.

All morning I had eagerly led the way, up hill and down dale, with John Gladman. This one day, I had vowed within myself, Fulke Bracy and Rose should thoroughly enjoy themselves ; for when Beau came he was so ridiculously jealous of Fulke that . . .

Jealous !—that one word was a torch lighting my own dark heart. For the miserable truth was, that in the last few days I had grown deadly jealous myself of my dear little sister. Oh, I struggled and strove against it, and yet could not help it. Each time my own especial old friend showed his new liking for Rose openly, it made me so sore-hearted and sick, I longed to creep away and be alone. With one great effort to be magnanimous, I had now begun the fight against my secret sin, never by word or look to betray myself or vex them, and more—carrying the war so far—that I even *sought* means to throw those two together. “Come on, John. Let us climb up to the Pixies’ Rock,” said my persuasive tongue. We had struggled for a mile down the steep wood, pushing through thickets, catching in brambles, stumbling over roots and rocks, as I disdained the cart-track; and now at last a lovely bit of sunny turf opened before us stretching up to a rocky mound, rough with brushwood, and crowned with great boulders.

“Bless me, isn’t it very hot?” meekly asked my poor squire, wiping his brow. “’Pon my honour, it’s queer that a slim pale girl like you should have so much spirit in her, Pleasance, when I’m nearly dead beat. I say—Bracy and Rose are not far behind us; I watched them as we came along; don’t you think we might wait for them?”

“No, no. They don’t want us—and you can rest up there when we have lunch.” So on we went, scrambling, toiling, and panting in the sun. How tired I was, and inwardly tempted to look back and *see* those others! But it was much better for myself to keep them out of sight. I was rather sorry for poor John, too, who had tried occasional awkward attempts at gallantry, all of which had been promptly repulsed. To be made do my

bidding all morning, yet not allowed to think himself favoured, was clearly puzzling.

Arrived at the summit, at last. I sank with a sigh of relief under the grateful shade of the Pixie Stones. These were great rocks cropping out from the green-sward, seeming, like most tors, a pile of huge irregular slabs, placed a-top of each other, that seen from a distance took grotesque outlines.

"There is the donkey-cart coming up the slope over yonder—the easiest way. They mean to have lunch on the fairies' bowling-green. *Won't* I be glad of it, just, after this climb?" Poor John was puffing still, as he spoke with a sound of coming rapture and a groan of manly pity for himself, after his late exertions.

"Cheer up! You can sit and rest on that stone, John. After all, if you have tired yourself, it was to please me," was my consoling remark, purposely not uttered with too much tenderness.

"Look here, Pleasance, I wonder now—whether you really *do* like me to please you."

I gave a start. What on earth was my old playfellow, my good god-mother's son, my kind host, going to say next? He had taken off his hat to mop his heated brows; and was now transfixing me with a gentle, slow stare, that on his flushed face reminded one somehow of one of the red cattle down in the wood. With a woman's first instinct in all dangers, I tried to cover my confusion by words.

"Why, John, what do you mean? Any woman likes to be pleased in little things like this by any man—don't you know that? Besides, you and I have been such good friends for your mother's sake . . ."

"Yes, yes; that is just it. But even a mother's wishes ought not to be everything in some matters. So

when you asked me to walk on to-day and leave the others, I thought I would be glad to know what you really thought, yourself, of me, Pleasance—don't you see?"

Hereupon, to hide embarrassment, John began kicking the ground so heavily, that it was well he wore the thickest of hob-nailed boots. This was a pretty plight; and all brought about by my misguided self-sacrifice!

"Oh, John, how can you vex me so?" I cried, feeling my eyes flash with resentment of his stupidity, yet my voice unable to sound more than hurt, he stood so blushing and confused. "I simply and only asked you to walk with me, because *I thought the others didn't want us—there!*"

"Well, if that is so, I'm sorry I spoke. I'm sorry, too, to have vexed you, Pleasance: such was never my intention, but quite the contrary. . . . However, I think I did the right thing, for honesty is the best policy. But as to the others not wanting us, I—don't—know—but what one man is as good as another." With which oracular sentence, John Gladman slowly turned away and left me alone. How mean and poor I felt! To have almost brought about a declaration from John, and annoyed him; annoyed myself; annoyed my good god-mother! Well, well, it was for the sake of Rose and *Mr. Bracy*. . . . So I sat alone and thought what a coil was here, and how would it end; would it be better to go away?

Now, I liked John dearly, and the life at the Farm, too. I should not have minded, all the rest of my days, pouring out the good fellow his tea; cutting him bread-and-butter off the big, home-made loaves; or even

darning his socks of an evening. But to do this of free will was one thing; to accept it as a duty to John, another. Besides, like other imperfect ordinary men, he had his fits of crossness, when his mare had a sore back, or the farm-bailiff had put the sheep into a wrong field, and in such moments of human frailty he would speak surlily even to his mother. Well! did Pleasance Brown love good John, she could very meekly bear this, knowing his honest brow would soon relax. But—only liking him—and being a fastidious, sensitive woman, might she not become angered, too? worse!—go on to pick secret faults with his bluff country manners, his lazy voice, and round good-humoured, but not much-thinking face. All which traits, I well knew, that given a little true affection, my mind would soon, womanly fashion, train itself into regarding, first, as forgivably characteristic; next, as dear to me personally; lastly, as pleasant, perhaps even adorable.

But then affection will not come at will; of all growths it is the shyest and most capricious in choosing where it will strike root.

So I was sitting, sorry and solitary enough, when round the rocks came Rose, her eyes alight, but not, it seemed, with pleasure.

"Oh, Pleasance, so here you are at last! Well, I *do* think you need hardly have gone right away from us all the morning, as you did—you must have heard us calling you both, and I—I—I—call it really *unkind*, so I do. Mr. Bracy thought it very strange—that I can tell you."

"But, Rose, I only did it fancying it would please you. My dear! you can't think anything else?"

"Think! I did think it was so ostentatious! Such

a marked way of showing what you wished," cried Rose, fuming in a little storm of strange anger. "Oh, people may be very fond of each other, still I, for one, would always consider appearances, especially before men. But then, thank goodness! I never was romantic or impulsive myself."

"Rose. . . ." The tears were fairly in my eyes now. It did seem too hard; after my secret self-sacrifice. But my voice had gone straight home to my sister's warm, if hasty little heart.

"Forgive me, my poor patient Pleasance. Don't mind what I said, dear—please—*please*."

"But, Rose, you must know best. If you think that for appearance' sake . . ."

"Yes, that's just it: for appearance' sake, you know," echoed Rose, drying her own eyes, though why she had quarrelled and cried with me seemed hard to tell. Only our sex in love, I reflected, are ridiculously ready to be nervous and cry at anything; witness myself in secret.

"I'll talk to Mr. Bracy, then, this afternoon; if you wish it," I continued, with a sudden upleaping of my heart, yet feeling sad enough next moment, heaven knows!

"Pleasance, you are an angel! If you don't really mind, dear, just only for this one afternoon. . . . I'll never ask you again, you may be sure of that."

Away went my sister, seeming unusually subdued but satisfied, all her plumes smoothed again. What a contradictory little mortal she was! But I concluded she had somehow fallen out with that kindest and best of men—my old friend, Mr. Fulke.

It is pleasant, after being healthfully tired, to rest

crouched in the golden bracken that is a glory on the hill-side, on a rarely beautiful summer's afternoon.

Oh gift of God ! Oh perfect day :
Whereon shall no man work, but play ;
Whereon it is enough for me,
Not to be doing, but to be !

It is more pleasant still, when close by on the turf, enjoying the same large blue sky bending over us, and the fair violet hills across the green valley, thinking with oneself, speaking all to oneself now and again, looking up in one's eyes, is the kindest, best, truest man of men one has ever known.

What Fulke Bracy and I talked of all that long summer's day it were hard to say ; only I know I was almost perfectly happy. There was no treason to Rose. She herself had ordained my stolen happiness. Strange enough, that Fulke seemed to enjoy himself as much ! But then, through relief of feeling, I showed an undisguised pleasure in his society that perhaps helped to beget pleasure : and a man can be "happy with either," when a woman can—not.

But, afterwards, I always remembered how when we chanced to speak of his pretty cottage, just visible two miles below us, near one of the curves of the winding Teign ; and in remorse I seized the long-looked-for chance to exclaim :

"Ah, yes, it is pretty, as you say, and no doubt endeared by associations of your mother. But still it is not Stoke ! Oh, Mr. Bracy, I regret so bitterly you ever offered to join Bob in farming at the Barn. It was generous, self-sacrificing ; but if you had not buried your money in the ground there you could have bought back *your* old home."

Such a gleam of friendship, of almost consolation, from the kind gray eyes opposite met my sorrowful glance, that I knew we were both touched to full sympathy.

"Don't think any more about that. Fate was against me ; that is all," said Fulke softly. Then smiling at me: "And as to burying my money, why ! it is coming up again in splendid crops. You should see the Barn *now*—you would hardly know it again. Bob and I will make a small fortune out of it some day. He is a splendid partner ; always cheery, always hard-working. No : I can never regret having helped him, and I believe that henceforth he will always be able to keep himself well afloat." Then musingly, after a pause : "I only wish for the sake of others besides him, that the robbery and neglect of your grand-aunt's property had been stopped years ago ; or that she had more than the Barn itself to leave to you and yours."

"That is hopeless," I sighed. "You know when the fire broke out at the Barn, all her fortune, which she had made over in notes to my grandfather that very day, hoping to save the family property—was burnt."

"Was the money burnt, or lost?—that is the question. Sir Reginald Beaumanoir, being in ill-health, and harassed by difficulties, caught a chill that night, they say, and died in a very few hours of that and the shock. He had just strength and sense enough left before death to tell his sister he rejoiced her money was safe, as her generous sacrifice was now useless. Then he recommended his infant daughter, your mother, to her care, and so he died. But though he knew most of the Baron's Stay was destroyed by the night's fire, no thought of this money being lost seems to have crossed his mind."

"Why, you know all the story. It has hardly been

spoken of since we were children," I exclaimed, surprised.

"Yes, I know it well. Indeed, for years, I may own to having tried, by every possible means, to trace that money, for friendship's sake to your old aunt. It was in Bank of England notes for five hundred each, the numbers of which were known," said Mr. Bracy, in a matter-of-fact tone of musing regret at his failure, evidently considering his self-imposed task quite an ordinary act. "Well, I had almost given up the idea, too, when your grand-aunt revived it strangely the other day by hoping the money might yet be found before she died."

"Good heavens, Mr. Bracy!—You don't think Aunt Bee is ill, that she is likely to die?"

"A very woman!—jumping at once to the wildest conclusions. I don't think anything of the sort; in fact, I believe I am beginning to—

Think that nought is worth a thought,
And I'm a fool for thinking.

But, by-the-way, what o'clock do you think it is!"

"I haven't an idea. But it can't be late, for there is John Gladman still picking blackberries for Rose, and he is as punctual as an eight-day clock, for his meals."

"It wants just three-quarters of an hour to supper!" We sprang to our feet in dismay; and this time it was we who called the other twain.

When we all reached the Farm, Beau had arrived. But as Mrs. Gladman indulgently remarked, she knew at lunch we had all had such a pleasant morning that no doubt the afternoon had been the same! Dear soul—not quite the same!

CHAPTER XXXIX.

OF all the Dartmoor valleys, surely none can compare in loveliness with Fingle Gorge, that down at its lower end has even a touch of the sublime ; where Cranbrook and Prestonbury Hills rise and confront each other grandly across the narrow pass, one in naked brownness, the other darkly clothed with wood.

"Why, this is very fine ! Really, Mrs. Gladman, I had no idea there was anything so fine in this part of the world," cried Beau, as we all went along the gorge by a narrow path midway on the steep hill-side.

"Hang him ! Why, he isn't satisfied with patronising us all but he must be patting nature on the back now, too," growled Bob, who was close behind me.

"Oh, hush, Bob," I murmured. "Don't you see how happy mother is ; she can't take her eyes off him ? He cannot help his nature after all. And we ought to be very glad he is so pleased with himself always, and with Dartmoor now—poor Beau !"

"Poor Beau !" mimicked my younger brother still angrily. "As if life was harder for him than others ! But because a fellow is handsome and idle, you women must needs pamper and pity him—and make him only a spoilt fine gentleman."

Thus grumbling, Bob strode ahead, calling out, "I say, Amy, the rest are all so slow ! Won't you come

on with me to the bridge?" But Amy, who was walking demurely on Beau's other side, in company with my mother, had her eyes and whole stolidly simple being so entirely engrossed by our handsome elder brother, she did not even notice his call, till Beau laughing answered for her with lordly lightness:

"No, no! go on by yourself, my good lad. We can't spare Miss Pawlett." And poor Amy, becoming aware of her own absence of mind, blushed over her brown plain face, but looked so pleased at the idea of Beau wanting her, it almost made her handsome.

I felt quite sorry, watching it all. Plainly Beau was no fallen star of fashion in Amy's eyes; but like an honest girl she liked him as much as when he was heir to his fair western home, and was petted and courted by far lovelier women, who now—forgot him. Her humble incense was no doubt grateful at this deserted shrine, for Beau now continued all that afternoon to pay her extravagant attention. It seemed to amuse him, thus to flutter poor Amy, and madden Bob, who, no doubt, disliked seeing his usual companion appropriated and "made a fool of." It was an Arcadian diversion, suitable to Wheatfield Farm and moor-life; just as in London he tried to put on Bohemianism—poor Beau!

As to the rest of us, Rose and I kept side by side, as ever since the day of our misunderstanding in the oak woods we had silently done. What was her secret motive, I felt shy of asking. Mine was the fear of somehow again playing a wrong part in those relations between Fulke Bracy and herself, that were so inexplicable (as generally happens) to all, excepting those most concerned.

As usual, John Gladman and his friend Bracy were beside us. The latter chatted with Rose. Afterwards, I could not remember that he ever directly addressed

me. Only if I said anything, however trivial, to either of the others, I saw he took notice of it even though they might not; and if I coveted a special wild-flower by the path he seemed to divine so, and would give it me without being asked. His eyes seemed to read the wishes in mine; mine silently thanked him. It was a strange footing of tacit intimacy, a secret sweetness that frightened yet allured me.

How beautiful that walk was! Still I remember it after the lapse of years, as I heard the others chatter and went with them strange and silent, but happy in the present, not daring to think of the future—feeling rather than seeing at times the look that seemed to say, “I understand you; you have a friend left in the world.” But he did not understand me then:—no, no: not quite. He understood Rose.

The bare hill, along the steep side of which we went, was here at Sharpitor’s rugged point all a sweet flush of violet heather, shading into soft brown. Across the gorge rose up thick green oak woods to an equal height. They seemed moving with us as we went as if walking in air on our high and narrow path, winding by curve and cliff—a curious feeling. Here and there, as we peered down, shaggy Dartmoor ponies could be seen grazing on the steep slopes, burnt so slippery with summer drought it was a wonder they found foothold. And, still further below, the Teign could be seen now and again frothing in gleams through the alders and greenwood. It could be better heard, now brawling hoarse by its great Logan-stone and fallen boulders, now tinkling with that gentle river murmur that ears long attuned thereto, listen for with longing as for a well-loved charm.

What part of England can compare with Devon-

shire? Its breezy, health-giving moors, where the herds of red cattle and the half-wild ponies are often the only living creatures to be seen in leagues of yellow gorse and sweet heather: the deep lanes, that, as the old song on them truly says—

With bud, blossom, berry are richly besprint—

the open glades where glowing red campion and blue-bells mingle in masses of such vivid colour as startle our eyes, accustomed to the usual more sober English green and gray hues of landscape and sky; the streams that bawl and babble down the valleys; the solemn great rocks, once Druid altars. Then here is the home of ferns, from the fairy tribes fringing every rough stone wall with delicate green, to the great and worshipful lady-ferns growing in cool damp spots in the deep woods, in such palm-like beauty as is elsewhere undreamed of.

We had tea at an old mill, not far from Fingle Bridge. Leaning idly afterwards on the moor-stone parapet of the bridge, in the niches built wisely, long ago, for foot-folk to avoid passing pack-horses, or a waggon broadly laden (the bridge being but narrow), we watched the stream.

"What is the charm of running water, I wonder? It seems to draw one's gaze, and to keep it always."

"It is the movement of life in the earth; the same as the secret of spring. One seems to see one of the pulses of Nature beating," said Fulke Bracy.

"It's to watch for trout . . . aw, at least that's why *I* like to look over here," said John good-humouredly and loudly at the same moment from the other side.

"It makes me think of all sorts of things," cried Bob;

"especially of our jolly days here long ago. Eh, Bracy—eh, Pleasance?" We two named smiled at each other.

The March Hare was leaning with half his body over the parapet, gloating in ecstasy at all the spirit-like finny forms, that as you watched would quiver and flicker over the sunlit gravelly shallows, like little shadows, disappearing from view in the deeper brown water. Bless him! he recalled to our memory every sunny open, each clump of willows or alders, all along the winding Teign from here up past Chagford bridge with its village beyond the meadows; by Holy Street trees and rocks, with their memories of the Druids, and old mill beloved of artists; to the woods of beautiful Gidleigh, where the little river comes down from the moor beyond through a pass so full of big rocks, and little rocks, and trees, that it is well-nigh impassable.

"My eyes! there rose a beauty," cried Bob, as a larger fish than usual sprang up, showing his silvery side, and dropped again. "Somehow this makes me think of the last good day's fishing I ever had at home—at dear old Stoke. St. Leger was one of us, and you, Beau. I remember he got tired of it very early, and went away home like an idiot—though he was a good fisherman."

"He got badly hooked himself. Eh! Pleasance, have you heard the end of our mutual friend Clair and the fair Jenny, his spouse?" said Beau, with a jeering laugh.

"No; what is it? I have heard almost nothing of them for a year," said I quietly; though had there been a sore spot in my heart left, Beau's tone would have been as hot iron to it. Beside me, Mr. Bracy looked far away, as I was well aware; it was kind of him, but he need not have done so.

"The so-called Begum is a Begum no more; that you all know, probably, and how she lost all she was worth, in the most literal sense (namely, her money). But the latest news is, that she has become, at least, a *grass widow* once more. Poor Clair found her temper so unbearable without her income, that they first agreed to differ, and then finally to part. So, as she pleases to live at his home, and that she drives him out of his senses, he has scraped up all he could, and joined some other fellows for a good time in the Rockies. Deuced hard, to be done out of the old woman's fortune in that way!"

"Serve him right, when he sold himself," cried Bob, flushing in indignation, while John slowly added a "Yes; just so," and Rose vivaciously echoed, with a "yes—just so, indeed!"

"I don't see it. Every man is bound to do the best he can for himself," retorted Beau. "All I can say is, if I get the chance of marrying any woman with a fortune, that would keep me as her lord and master in ease, won't I just snatch at it—that's all! Money, money, that's the main thing."

There was a silence after this. Poor Amy shrank into herself, as if her short-lived joy was withered. My mother looked pained; she thought, no doubt, of Alice. We all felt jarred, more or less, by Beau's tone and words, as if among the gentle Arcadians he thought us, had come a sneering cynic from the great cruel world, where he had learned—

the hideous trick
Of laughing at whate'er is great or holy.

Fulke Bracy broke the uneasy spell by telling Mrs. Gladman, in his pleasantly masterful way, that it was time to go home. My silent blessing was upon him, always ready to help others in great troubles or in little

difficulties. To quote Charles the Second's famous epigram, he was certainly "never in the way, and never out of the way."

On the homeward path, I said little to any one ; yet, while my eyes strayed, as if heedful of nothing else, now on the green gorge below us with the ribbon of water half hidden in its heart, now on the breezy, honeyed, heather slopes rising on our right, whence the bees were taking their last heavy evening flight, I was thinking and wondering to myself on something nearer even than this fair nature—my own woman's heart. The old refrain, "How did I know I should love him now, whom that day I held not dear?"—the wonder that so many other women must have felt, who were loved, and loved others, through the many bygone ages. How could one have been so blind to this man's perfections in the past? And now it was *too late* !

None of the rest said very much either. Even Rose's chirrup was hushed ; though, like the ever busy bee she was, her little hands were slowly arranging great bunches of heather which John Gladman and Mr. Bracy vied in gathering for the selected housekeeper of Wheatfield Farm.

Only Beau was irrepressibly gay. As if partly conscious of our different feelings, and amused by his Mephistophelian *rôle*, with a sense of evil-joy, he rallied most of us in turn ; then laughing at our discomfiture, hummed snatches of French songs. I caught the words now and again of De Musset's "*Tout s'en va comme la fumée*."

Mais que dis-je ? ainsi va le monde.

Ferme tes yeux, tes bras, ton âme ;
Adieu, ma vie, adieu, Madame,
Ainsi va le monde ici-bas.

At last Mr. Bracy, coming up beside me, said in a quiet undertone :

"What wild spirits your brother is in to-day !"

"Yes. I wish he was not quite so much so,"—with a sigh.

"He vexed you ; I am so sorry." This was in a still lower, kindlier tone, through which sounded a fine vein of such curiously-regretful sympathy that I divined what was in his mind, at once.

"You think I was hurt about Mr. St. Leger. No ; no—what I told you before is more than ever true now—that he is quite dead to me, and passed out of my life. Thank you ! I saw you felt for me. But as you have always been such a good friend, look me in the eyes now ; and see for yourself that I can say most honestly I am sorry for Clair St. Leger, but otherwise his memory does not affect me at all."

As he was bidden, Fulke Bracy did look at my face straight with his keen, searching gray vision. We were alone for the moment at the bend of a path—and my eyes unaccountably fell.

Oh shame ! Yet I knew he was not thinking of any past Clair St. Leger at that moment of swift onrushing change of thought. Did he guess, too, that my flush revealed consciousness of the fact ? In haste, I added : "But as to Beau, I have sometimes a superstitious feeling that it is unlucky for people to laugh so much ; that they are *fey*, as the Scotch say, and it bodes misfortune."

"We will hope not," replied my companion absently, as leaving the path we came out on the open hill-top of Hunter's Tor.

The sun was setting in widespread glory ; the outgoing of the evening was praising its Creator. Its

sinking flame lit up the far moorlands, and the cultivated vale stretching below us—the “champaign country” around wild Dartmoor. It brightened the stony hill-side of Whidden Park, with its strong-growing Scotch firs and great white-boled beeches. It lit up the whole land with one of those gleams of transcendent, but as evanescent loveliness, that seem sent from another world.

“There is your cottage down yonder, Bracy,” exclaimed Beau; who, intoxicated with his own high spirits and artistic delight in the beauty of the scene, sprang on and on from grassy ridge to rock of the steep tor that here overlooked the junction of the gorge and wider vale. “Come, as your house is the nearest here, we ought to draw you for hospitality.” Prophetic words, could he but have known it!

“Come back, Beau. Take care, Brown!” called both Bob and Fulke Bracy in warning tones. “The grass is burnt as slippery as ice there. We know Hunter’s Tor well. . . .”

“Why, do you both suppose I can’t take care of myself?” came back the jeering answer; disregarding a slow-sounding piece of advice just begun by John Gladman, who had only now realised his guest’s danger.

I can see Beau still! The handsome figure outlined against the sky, dressed artist-like in a light, easy-fitting summer suit; a straw hat of strange Bohemian shape on that handsome head which any mother’s eye must have fondly admired.

A moment or two I saw him, so; then—he disappeared! . . .

There was a wild cry; but it came from us all, not from him. We rushed forward, reckless of danger, to

gaze over the edge of the steep slope, where, down below sheer rock and outcropping bushes that yet could not give him friendly aid, lay—a something !

“Will he live?” we asked the doctor some hours later, with hushed breath and fearful faces.

“Yes ; at least we may hope so, with great care. But still there is terrible injury : poor fellow, poor fellow !”

We were in the Artist’s Cottage, to which they had carried him as the nearest shelter : Fulke Bracy’s home. And poor Beau, so little while ago, had laughingly claimed its hospitality !

CHAPTER XL

Now we felt poor indeed.

Beau, our unhappy brother, was lying incapable of being moved for weeks, it might be months to come ; and he was under Mr. Bracy's roof. Under the roof of the man we seemed thus to have twice dispossessed, once at Stoke, now here again. He had generously given up the little cottage entirely to my mother and to Bob, who was, could it be believed ? the most useful, gentlest-handed of men-nurses.

Each day, by turns, Rose and I spent hours watching by the sick-bed in the darkened room. At night, my mother drove us away, almost fiercely, to Wheatfield Farm, when we begged to stay and share her toils. We were young and wanted sleep, she said ; nothing hurt her—she had little to live for, now. In truth, with the strange selfishness of love, she could not bear sharing the care of her idol with any others.

A fortnight had gone like a dream. So many slow leaden days ; and yet this evening, thinking back, it seemed but yesterday we had come up the gorge. I could smell the heather again ; see the sunset !

Rose and I were sitting close together in a little study at Wheatfield Farm. It only looked out on the homely back premises ; out-houses with brown thatched roofs, a little courtyard where strayed some clucking hens with their tender broods. A heavy shower fell

fast; but what did the view matter to us? We had come here to be undisturbed, and were looking sadly at each other.

"A cripple for life! always on his back. How terrible for him!—poor, poor Beau!" I murmured, repeating the dread fiat of the two best west-country doctors we had sent for, regardless of expense.

"It is dreadful for all of us. The Cottage is so tiny, only barely room for three persons in it; yet Beau cannot be moved, they say, for months," said Rose, knitting her brows together in the endeavour to be firm and practical—our dear little housekeeper; but looking to me as a master-spirit to shape our future plans, which she would carry out.

"Oh, Pleasance, what shall we do?"

"We will get rid of the 'Dusthole,'" said I, meaning the little London house that had never been "home" for a day; then, desperately: "And we *must* pay Mr. Bracy what rent we can, no matter what he so kindly says! Then, let one of us stay with mother, and the other one go elsewhere, out into the world. Alice is fond of you still, Rose; she will never more ask me." To my surprise, the tears came up in Rose's eyes, that were usually as bright brown as a berry.

"Anything but that; ask me anything else, dear Pleasance: I'll do whatever you tell me; I'll be a nursery-governess, or even a *housemaid*. It was such slavery last year! I never told any one, for as we are so poor, I knew it was right to stay, but"—in a lower voice—"Alice was so angry with me about Sir John Dudgeon. You remember him at Broadhams. The Golden Calf, we called him; a rich fool."

"And you refused him, is that it? Come; tell me, Rose?"

"Yes; of course. But it was not because I said no, but because *he had asked me*," explained Rose, dropping her voice and speaking very fast. "You see she likes him so much; and oh! I wish people did not hint and laugh about her."

My own story almost repeated. Would it always be so, to the end, with Alice—poor Alice!—once ours. But she had indeed passed far out of the humble circle of our lives. It might be we should never more come together; never, at least, as we once had been.

"Dear child; dear Rose and we did not guess you had this to bear."

"Oh, what did it matter, you had far worse; and you never said a word after that time at Broadhams. That helped me, when I remembered it," said my little sister bravely.

At this we drew close together and comforted each other. The rain still came down.

"We can't *both* stay on here," murmured Rose. Then with apparent effort, she went on: "But Mrs. Gladman always expected you for a long, long visit; so send me to the Cottage; I'll—I'll promise not to come up here too often." Whereupon, to my great surprise, she burst out sobbing.

Now what did this mean?

"Rose," I cried, "do you think—tell me honestly, dear, as between sisters! no other living soul shall know of it—do you think you will see less of *him* down there at the Cottage than up here? Is that it?"

"Oh, what is the use of talking about me? You like him, and his mother wants it: and you know you will marry him some day," uttered Rose with a little desperate cry.

"His mother—whom do you mean?" I exclaimed, a new light breaking in on me.

"I mean John Gladman, of course."

At the great sense of relief her words gave me, I burst out laughing, from pure nervousness. My sister looked at me utterly astonished. Then she saw there was no unkindness meant.

"Oh, Rose, Rose; and I thought it was Fulke Bracy all the time!"

"Well, then, you were blind. Why, we were only great friends, because he told me a little, and I guessed more about you and himself. Oh dear, I did so hope you would change your mind, Pleasance."

Whereat we two once more drew close, this time even closer together; and long-repressed mutual confidences were eased from our hearts like a load.

"Remember, I don't *know* if he is still of the same mind," said Rose. "Dear me, who is that calling?"

"Rose, Rose, my pet, will you come and help me to cover the pots of blackberry jam?" said Mrs. Gladman, putting in her kindly face at the door a moment. "What, Pleasance, are you offering, too? No, no, dear child, I only want one of my daughters, really; so I shall carry off my useful Martha, and Mary is to sit still there till presently I come to rest, and then she is to talk to me."

CHAPTER XLI.

THEY had both gone and left me alone. I sat with my hands lightly folded in my lap, and thought.

The rain-shower was almost over. The evening sun with one last glorious outburst lit up all the valley, and shone on the rough-paved courtyard and the thatched out-house roofs before me.

Have you ever watched a newly-thatched roof in the rain? how the myriad drops run pearly down it in thousands of crystal globes, each minute but distinct, while every straw-stalk holds a dewdrop at its tip! And now with that ray of sun the wet eaves begin to gleam; and now again, when the rainbow appears arching over the Fingle valley, each drop flashes back a ray of light till the whole thatched surface fairly glitters with diamonds. It is exquisite; it is a poem.

So I thought, and a voice said behind me: "Yes, how different from a commonplace slated roof, down which the rain pours in a dismal, even, gray stream!"

I started. Fulke Bracy stood behind me, his eyes having been quietly following the direction of mine. "Have I frightened you?—I am so sorry," he went on, "only guessing what you were watching I could not resist looking too, a moment, before saying what I have come to speak to you about."

How well he always knew what was passing in my

mind ; and indeed he never startled me—we were too much in sympathy for that.

"You have something to say to me, Mr. Bracy? I am so glad you have come ; for I wanted to speak to you, too. For these last two days I have wished to talk to you about the Cottage, but you have always avoided me."

"Not avoided *you*," returned Bracy quickly, meeting my grateful eyes, and turning his away.

"May I speak first? Your grand-aunt has been telling me to-day that she feels unwell, and is pining for home. Now I don't wish to alarm you, but it seems to me that when she has this longing, the sooner she is taken back to the Barn the better."

"Aunt Bee! What? Oh, you don't think her really ill, do you, Mr. Bracy? I have been uneasy myself, but"

"But, as I said before, you need not be frightened. Only she is really an old woman ; though she has almost taught us all to forget that. And—I do not think she ought to be allowed to go back alone."

"I see. You think I ought to go with her?"

My friend nodded.

"And leave my mother and Beau?"

He silently nodded again ; then added :

"Yes. They can do without you, but to her it may make all the difference to have you." Then seeing me pale and wistful at the new thoughts and fears thus opened up, he tried to give me consolation. Still, I had seen my old aunt drooping even before Beau's terrible accident. That had withdrawn my attention from her. But if she who had hardly ever had an ache in her whole previous life, and never flinched from our side in trouble, now owned to feeling ill, and wanted

to creep away from us all to her lonely house, it meant that age and health must be going ill with the brave old lady.

"Yes, yes; I will go with her of course," I murmured. "She has devoted herself to us all her life, and now . . . But surely her own fireside, her old associations, will all revive her. Oh, they must! dear old Aunt Bee! When ought we to start, do you think, Mr. Bracy? Please advise me."

"If you are not too hurried, I think we ought to leave to-morrow. You know Miss Beaumanoir's restless ways. She has often started on her travels at a few hours' notice."

"*We?* what do you mean, Mr. Bracy?" as some inkling of his intention dawned on my mind.

"That I am going with you. It is too much for you to have such a charge alone, if your grand-aunt were to get ill by the way; and she is my oldest friend."

Almost a cry came from my lips in thankfulness at the idea, looking up in his friendly, kind face. "It is too good of you—it is too good!" I found myself repeating, all the thoughts and words in my brain being so crowded that only small and worthless ones could escape. "And for us, who have turned you out of house and home! Oh, Mr. Bracy, you know we will gladly repay you all we can, but we can never give you enough *gratitude*."

"Pleasance!—gratitude!"

The man I loved looked full at me, the evening sun lighting up his features, that were handsome enough in the eyes of all the world, but to me were now the most beautiful ever seen. He spoke in a full, deep voice, with one of those vibrations of strong feeling only heard a few times in one's whole life.

"Let that word be banished henceforth and for

evermore between you and me. But for the fear that mere gratitude might move you, which God forbid, I had come here this evening to ask you once more——”

The door-handle turned, and my good god-mother appeared, smiling, with Rose in the background.

“Well, dear Pleasance, Martha has made herself useful ; and it is Mary’s turn to come to the parlour and tell us all manner of pleasant and pretty things.” Then, as her eyes fell on our faces, and she must have read the arrested interest there :

“But I beg your pardon. You were both busy ; talking business together about the Cottage, no doubt. Yes, yes ; I know, Mr. Fulke, how anxious this sweet, foolish girl is, not to be beholden to you for the least thing. She is too proud ; far too proud.” So my good god-mother rambled on, making mischief unawares, whilst I felt in agony, powerless to stop her. She ended : “Well, we will leave you now, unless indeed I can be of any help as a go-between in your little money matters ; the rent or——”

“No, no ; thank you, Mrs. Gladman,” exclaimed poor Fulke ; rising directly, in an agony at the idea of our occupation of his cottage being regarded in the light of a business transaction ; we so poor ; he, by comparison, so rich.

“I had quite finished all I had to say to Miss Brown ; all of any importance, at least. If you are going back to the parlour let us go too.”

Mrs. Gladman of course acquiesced, but looked at us with puzzled kindness. She had seen we were in difficulties of some sort, and supposed it *must* be the mere awkwardness of discussing pounds, shillings, and pence, between friends ; hence her attempt to set us at ease.

So my interview with Mr. Bracy was over, and—*what had he meant to ask?* Should I ever know? Perhaps not, perhaps not! Such words once arrested may happen never again to be spoken.

CHAPTER XLII.

I took my grand-aunt, therefore, back to her home.

It was a strange journey: for she insisted on returning in the old gig, now mended again. For one-and-thirty years she had driven in it, and it should carry her till she died, she said. So this time I drove old Lazybones, and it was Mr. Bracy who rode beside us on Bob's horse, Dandelion.

Truly my friend had been right in saying that I should need his help in my task; for though on starting Aunt Bee revived into almost her old vivacity, as we drove away in the fresh morning air, and that she waved a farewell cheerily to those at the Farm gate who looked after us, it was only a momentary spark of brightness.

At the first hill-crest, she looked back into the pleasant valley with a little sigh; seeing the brown buildings of Wheatfield Farm embosomed in trees; and half-a-mile away, where the beautiful gorge opened, a white speck that was the Artist's Cottage.

"Well, we had all a pleasant time—while it lasted,"

she murmured to herself, not sadly, but with a certain contented resignation, like a fairly happy old Epicurean.

Then she let her head sink on her chest, and altogether collapsed into seeming much smaller and more withered than ever before.

All our long day's journey she never roused from her apathy or apparent stupor as we drove up hill and down dale, only resting at mid-day: and I watched her anxiously, and Fulke Bracy watched us both. He never spoke to me, or hinted again, of that interrupted subject; but indeed on this journey he could not, even if he would.

By evening we came in sight of well-known landmarks—soon of more familiar objects. Seeing these, my Aunt Bee began to sit up, to my great relief.

Was this indeed the rack-rent, forlorn demesne I once knew? Trim meadows, well-ploughed fields, sound gates, and good fences; such was now Bob's farm, as we skirted it. Our dear March Hare seemed to have a lucky hand, all had so prospered. And as we drove through the once tumble-down gateway and roofless lodge, now a pretty entrance by the brawling river, where no longer straggling branches of neglected trees and underwood whipped our faces, the old lady looked as keenly around as in her good days. The old house with its ruin still looked, truly, far more worthy of being called the Barn than the Baron's Stay. Nevertheless the inhabited portion showed signs of care, too, in fresh paint on doors and gable-ends, in nailed-up creepers; and then—to her it was home.

Out ran a maid to the door, as we stopped.

"Where is Tozer, to help me down?" asked Miss Beaumanoir sharply, looking round as if with a presentiment of evil, on missing her shabby factotum. There

was a silence. Then came the faltering news that old Tozer had been taken ill the night before ; he had fallen in a fit, and was not expected to last long.

Mr. Bracy took my grand-aunt's arm to support her, as standing on the doorstep she heard this news. His eyes, meeting mine, told how he understood my anxiety on her account.

The old lady stood quite still for a few moments ; then she only said, "Like mistress, like man !"—and went steadily into the dark-wainscoted hall.

That night, after as strangely nondescript a supper as was usual at the Barn, we three gathered round the wide stone fire-place, which Fulke Bracy heaped high with logs, stirring up a cheerful blaze, otherwise the dark, musty-smelling room would have seemed dismal that night. He offered to play backgammon with my grand-aunt kindly ; but she preferred to sit crouched over the fire warming herself. Presently she said, breaking a silence :

"Poor Tozer ! . . you were both surprised I could take my old servant's coming death so quietly, but to me it seems all for the best. Perhaps, had he lived longer, I ought to have looked more into his accounts and all my affairs—for Bob's sake. . . . Well, well, he was faithful to me in his own way for many years. If he robbed me, as I have often thought, he knew well enough I never cared for mere money. Nobody is wholly good or utterly bad, I believe ; and he would have laid down his life for his old mistress . . . all for the best, after all."

After this, as neither of us dreamt of uttering a dissentient syllable, she strayed into old-world stories of her youth.

My attention wandered once or twice, I must own ; perhaps it crept after my gaze that looked furtively at

Fulke Bracy's handsome head thrown into full relief by the pale old Chinese screen behind him. The flickering flame-spurts showed his eyes kindly watching the old woman's face ; his whole bearing one of unflagging interest and sympathy. Once or twice, only, came a quick, full glance *at me*, as instantly turned away.

Oh, I knew what was in his mind ! His old friend of years was failing, therefore he redoubled his almost filial devotion, and denied himself even one stray thought whilst he still could give her pleasure. How good he was ! how kind ; what a perfect friend !

All day, not a syllable of thanks to him had crossed my lips, for my grand-aunt was always beside me. Yet how I should ever have brought her safely home without his active help and gentle care, surpassing that of a woman, heaven knows ! The very sight of him riding beside us cheered both our spirits.

I roused from reverie to find my aunt saying : " Well, somehow, I always have a fancy that money will be found ; sooner or later, Bracy."

" I trust so . . . but is it not getting rather late ? " answered Fulke, with a covert glance at me, who understood the warning.

As we said good-night, I tried to *look* my thanks just for once. But, the instant the true man's eyes above met mine, my gaze grew confused, and I looked down. My grand-aunt was beside us.

" Give me your arm upstairs, Pleasance," said she. It was the first time in her life, the first time even this day she had asked help.

Once in her room, she turned upon me as keenly and quizzically as she would have done ten years ago.

" Look me straight in the face, child ! What is there now between you and Bracy ? "

"What is there?—why, friendship, of course," was my weakly evasive answer, trying my best not to meet those piercing old black eyes.

"Friendship—fudge! Does he mean to marry Rose or not?"

"What he may mean, he knows best himself; but Rose does not mean to marry him."

The old lady drew a long breath not unlike a whistle, in its expression of meaning. "I begin to believe you were all at cross-purposes down at Wheatfield Farm, and that certain young people are geese."

"I think so too. I always was called a goose when I was a child," was the meek answer she received.

"Yes, you are a dear little goose. Good-night, Pleasance: sleep sound, my child. I am very much pleased with you."

CHAPTER XLIII.

NEXT morning, we all three met at breakfast as early as usual ; and that meant with my grand-aunt desperately early.

Mr. Bracy and myself, degenerate younger mortals, only just scrambled down in time ; whilst Aunt Bee had already been out and about the premises.

"Open the window, please," she said presently. "Close air always oppresses me : I should have been an Arab."

I did as she wished, but in my own mind thought the moist autumn air that entered was heavy with the odours of decaying leaves. In what was now a trim garden, outside the windows, dying spikes of summer flowers stood sadly up, or yellowing masses of nasturtium lay dying together.

Heavily hangs the hollyhock,
Heavily hangs the tiger-lily.

Autumn, in a garden, is to me the saddest time of the year. Oh, to be up on the moors then, when the heather is still alive in all its beauty, purpling the hills in violet sweeps for miles and miles !—and one feels invigorated in the strong west wind that carries with it the scent of the leagues of gorse across which it has blown.

So I said ; and Fulke Bracy heartily agreed with

me, against my grand-aunt, who defended her beloved low-lying woods around the Baron's Stay.

"Stoke is the only place surrounded by forest land, where I never felt the pressure of dying vegetation," he said.

"Ah! at Stoke, no; but then it lies so high, and all the air is so crisp and clear," I was eagerly joining in, our eyes meeting gladly at last with full understanding.

"When you two once begin to rave about that old home of yours, both, it is time for me to go away. I'll leave you to rhapsodise together," interrupted my grand-aunt, rising with an air of haste—the crafty old lady.

"No, no, don't go away, Aunt Bee; or, if you must go, I have to be busy, too, writing letters."

Her secret wish to leave me alone with Fulke was so plain to myself, I felt as if he must guess it too; and in confusion I turned to the great escritoire, the same rare old piece of furniture that had always been called my especial legacy by my grand-aunt, and of which indeed I kept the key. Why would my face burn so with a quick, foolish blush?

"What a perfect piece of Middle Age workmanship that is!" said my old friend, Mr. Fulke, kindly pretending to believe I had bent my head to admire the exquisite inlaid flowers on the door-panels before me. "Do you know, that often as I have admired this treasure of yours, the inside has always been a forbidden sight. Miss Beaumanoir has always said it was your especial property ever since you were a child, and would allow no one else to open it."

"Show it to him now, Pleasance," directed my grand-aunt, who stood bent witch-like beside us, uncertain whether to go or stay, but herself feeling the childish

curiosity of an old person in any sight not seen for some years.

This is how the strangest event in my life came simply to pass.

So I opened wide the inlaid doors, and showed with pride the interior ; all the drawers and pigeon-holes were as finely inlaid as the outside, with carved edges. They surrounded a miniature temple with pillars, mirrors, a mosaic floor, and swinging lamps. The central object in this shrine was a tiny Cupid, exquisitely carved in ivory, poised in a niche, facing us.

"How charming! I have only seen one that equalled it, and that was in Ghent, years ago, when a great Burgomaster's heirlooms were sold. What do you keep in there behind the rail, where only the high priestess of this little god may look?" said Bracy, smiling at me.

I did not understand him. What secret drawers I knew, in my cherished possession, had already been displayed with pride.

"That one of the Burgomaster's had a still more hidden chamber at the back, I remember. This bureau may not possess it, of course ; still they are very much alike in other details. May I try?"

He pressed one of the squares of alternate ebony and ivory with which the mimic temple floor was inlaid ; and lo ! to our astonishment, the whole central niche and Cupid at once receded sideways, disclosing a cavity, inside which lay, unseen by any eyes for years, a small roll of what seemed old and yellowed thin papers.

A cry burst from us all three in our surprise. But the most excited of us was my grand-aunt, who quite gasped out :

"Bracy! Bracy! do you see?—can it be?" She

bent forward, and with her own withered hands lifted out and unfolded tremblingly the bundle ; then in a tone that thrilled through us, exclaimed, "*It is the money!*—the whole of my fortune, twenty thousand, in Bank of England notes, just as I gave it to my brother, the day before this house was burnt, fifty-three years ago. . . Oh, I knew it was not lost ; I always felt so, though I had no more reason than a mad woman. . ." She paused, still striving for breath. "And to think it was *here* all the time!" Her figure swayed slightly ; she clutched at my arm for support. Fulke Bracy caught her quickly before worse could happen, and gently laid her down in an arm-chair quite unconscious.

"Send for the doctor," he hurriedly whispered to me ; and though he would not say a word then that would have alarmed me more, I knew the same thought was in his mind as in mine, that this money might have come too late—for my dear old grand-aunt.

CHAPTER XLIV.

IN the afternoon of that day, my Aunt Bee sent for me.

She was sitting now, I was thankful to see, bolt upright in her usual straight-backed chair in her own sitting-room. This was a strange den, so dark, dusty, and massed with books and papers, sacredly barred from a housemaid's sacrilegious touch, it might have been supposed Faust's study; though in fact these were only the accidental accumulations of thirty-one years' un-studious "meaning-to-read-them-some-day" ways of the old lady. Hung on the walls were Eastern tapestries, Japanese armour, and curios enough to stock a small museum, all relics of travels; whilst mixed with these were various farm implements, such as new-fangled hoes, and spades bought on trial at Agricultural Shows; and tables and bureaux groaned with bottles of cow-medicine and books on farriery.

"Sit down there opposite me, Pleasance," said the old lady with a sharp nod, and a satisfied gleam in the dark caverns of her eyes. "So you sent for the doctor to-day, little goose! as if he could do me any good. I've doctored myself all my life; and who could have had better health, tell me that?" Then, as I tried to justify myself, she waved her hand, and said, closing her eyelids rather wearily for a second or two: "I know, I know; it was right for you to do so, of course. But I

did better : I sent for my lawyer, and he has been here with me for the last two hours. The notes are perfectly good, he says ; their identity cannot be possibly disputed, so now you will be an heiress, dear."

"I!—how?—what do you mean?" I stammered, confused.

"I made my will to-day, leaving the Barn to Bob, and this money to you, child ; so consider it your own this minute. Take it, and do what you like with it. What is money to me?"

What broken, astonished words of gratitude, of representation and thankful dissuasion, I uttered, is more than my memory can repeat. Only my grand-aunt ended them all, I remember (only too well), by rising and holding out her hand for me to support her steps that tottered this day for the first time.

"Give me your young arm, and take me upstairs," she said, smiling ; "I am my own doctor, and mean to go to bed now, and sleep a long time."

So I helped her upstairs and into bed ; and recollect well how the sun was just sinking redly through the yellowing damp woods, and gleaming on the hurrying brown water of the little river.

"Now, good-night, dear, and don't disturb me till morning," said my dear grand-aunt. "Sleep is what I want, sleep is best for me. I never used to feel tired, but now I feel a very tired old woman. Good-night."

Downstairs, Fulke Bracy and I dined alone together that evening ; and together afterwards looked out of the curtainless parlour windows in the starry autumn night. We spoke in hushed whispers of the strange events of that day. Was I right when it struck me my best friend's manner had somehow changed as he offered his congratulations on my being "an

heiress"? Somehow—imperceptibly, with a shade of manner too delicate to express in words; yet sympathy made me feel *he* felt as if my sudden fortune had pushed us a little apart. And we had drawn so near, so near to each other in the last two days!

Moment by moment, this feeling grew on me as we stood in thought-weighted spaces of silence beside one another; only broken by an occasional word from either of us about my grand-aunt, or those we had left at Dartmoor. My brain grew so troubled, I lost all control over my own thoughts, and only tortured myself trying to fathom and combat those of the man beside me. *If* he thought . . .

The twilight was darkening; we stood alone in the window. The silence that was so troubled might have been so sweet.

And yet I knew that this silent human soul beside me had loved me long, loved me so lately—surely, surely, despite my strange fortune discovered that morning—loved me still!

If he thought that roll of faded notes need separate us by an inch, oh! I would gladly have torn them then and there into little pieces, and flung them out of the window for the west night wind to carry them into the hurrying brook, or whirl them through the dying woods to play hide-and-seek with the fallen leaves. And so it was, I cried out with sudden impulse, that brought a sound like a sob from my throat.

"I don't want this money. I will not take it. Let Bob have it to improve the Barn with it, and make a home here for us all."

Fulke Bracy turned now, and looked at me full. There was a gleam lighting up his good gray eyes,

and a smile began dawning round the corners of his mouth.

"But Miss Beanmanpoir wished *you* to have it—does that go for nothing? Besides, the Barn is improving itself, simply by being taken care of, after years of neglect and sheer barefaced robbery. Your grand-aunt knows that; and that Bob and I will make a fair income out of it (for I have my small share in your family fortunes, remember). Your brother may marry too, and your home here would then be lost."

"Then let the others have it."

"You must remember that poor Beau will want very little now, and may not even want that little long," returned Bracy very gently; then with his voice brightening to a cheerfuller suggestion: "As to Rose, don't you think that she also may find a comfortable and happy home of her own; perhaps, not far from Wheatfield Farm? Your mother?—yes; but what is yours would be hers, for all needful purposes while she lives. I thought your grand-aunt was right, Pleasance; for she told me this afternoon of her intention and wishes."

The last word was spoken so small I could hardly hear it, though Fulke was standing now quite close, and looking at last long and earnestly in my face. It was growing so dark, what could he see there?

Frightened now at what I had wished for, made happy in my secret heart when he said "*Pleasance*" once more, in a slow, lingering tone, as if he loved the name, I yet still objected faintly, though trembling, not knowing why. "If you think so, it must be right for me to keep it. But it will give me no pleasure."

"My dear child, you might buy back Stoke."

The words were softly spoken, yet with a playful

touch of banter meant to show Pleasance Brown what pleasant prospect those odious bank notes opened up.

I stamped my foot, and cried almost with tears of rage.

"Yes; buy Stoke indeed, and live there! after knowing that you have been longing for the old home all these years; after Beau refusing it to you when you *could* have bought it; after my asking you to help Bob, so that you sunk half your hard-won savings in this farm and demesne. Heaven bless you for your goodness! And now when we—or, no, no, rather our unlucky fortunes—make us turn you even out of your Dartmoor cottage that you loved, because your mother died there, you *think* I could live happily at Stoke!" My sobs followed fast at his doing me the injustice of supposing me so ungenerous; and through hot, thick tears, these words only made themselves intelligible. "Never! much as I love it! For your sake, I could not do that."

"My dear Pleasance! Remember that there is the old home to be had, but that I cannot afford—just yet—to have it."

"Then take it from me. Let me help you. You helped Bob: it is only fair. He will repay you, and you will repay me. Yes, yes: say you will! *you must!*"

"Pleasance, darling!"

As I spoke in a flame of womanly love and excitement hot from my heart, Fulke Bracy caught my hands, his man's soul on fire too. A flash in his eyes that lit his whole face, as I could see even in the twilight, answered the wet gleam in mine. And then what followed never can be rightly told, or even perhaps rightly remembered by me.

Only this, that he said—he declared—and made me believe as fully in his words as in gospel truth, *that if I would not live at Stoke without him, neither would he without me!*

What I felt, what I said, then what we both said and did, all seem now a vague dream, made sacred to mystery by happiness. We seemed only to be conscious that we two, we two were together—for always.

The twilight had become darkness, the stars shone out; but now as we stood still in the window the silence was, sweet, the trouble all vanished.

At last hand unclasped hand, and I lifted my head from Fulke's broad shoulder, remembering my grand-aunt, and feeling she must not be neglected.

"What will she say to this, I wonder? We two at Stoke!"

"It was Miss Beaumanoir's own suggestion this very afternoon—there, don't start, dear. She knew my two great wishes, first to have you, then the old home, and said nothing could make her happier."

We went softly up the black creaking stairs together, and I slipped into my grand-aunt's room. She was sleeping peacefully; breathing so low and regularly, it made me think of an aged child at rest, and such indeed she was in heart. So I came back gladly to tell Fulke, who waited outside, anxious about his old friend.

"She is sleeping so well," I said.

"That is good news, for us," he said in the kindly tone that came so straight from his heart, and warmed mine with fresh happiness only to hear him. "And now good-night, Pleasance, my darling at last." As our lips met once more, and for the last time that night, I thought how happy the true old heart in there, who loved us both

so dearly, would be when she knew that at last we two had come together.

She slept well, indeed, my dear old grand-aunt.

She slept so well that, though I stole in several times through the night to watch, there was no change in her peaceful breathing, or sign of pain on the features that seemed years younger, softened and ennobled by a dreamy smile. And yet, when a new day dawned, she was no longer with us. It seemed as if, while her tired, aged body rested, the soul had slipped out and away, free to undertake, it may be, a longer journey than even she who loved travelling best of all delights had ever dreamed; free, at least, I for one doubt not, to enter into a new existence.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE winter had been with us and was gone, and the time of the singing of birds had come. The dark, drear time of Nature was past ; the time too of our mourning, and first bitterness of sorrow for the kindly, brave old soul we should never see among us any more on earth.

Once more we were gathered together, down in the well-known valley, under breezy Dartmoor.

There in the pretty whitewashed cottage at the opening of the Fingle gorge, the sunshine and new life of the year had, alas ! brought no fresh spring of health to our poor sufferer. Sometimes, on a fine morning at the Cottage, Beau was carried outside carefully on a couch. There he lay just able to look down the valley at the lovely scene, helpless, hopeless. It was all the movement he knew now ; he who had been so fond of change, of pleasure, and society.

How my mother watched her darling first-born, her idolised son, with a jealous love so engrossing, that all care for the present, all sorrow for the past, seemed put aside out of her mind. He was all hers now—no one else could please him so well.

In former times, Beau used to be tempted so easily from the home-hearth that even at Stoke we hardly ever saw him ; though there only love, luxury, and admiration

awaited the heir. He had roved still more gladly, alas ! from the mean little London home—though a mother's heart he knew was watching anxiously and lovingly for his step and voice. But now, the only being to whom his face turned, for whom his heart yearned, whether with need or from love of her, was that mother. It was sufficient to her, for as near an approach to happiness as her widowed heart could know.

One other person, indeed, waited upon Beau with a devotion which such handsome, selfish men do often strongly inspire in woman-kind. This was Amy Pawlett.

A bond of sympathy had seemed to link her and my mother to one another. What this might be, was an open secret to us women. But it was never spoken of openly among us ; and so John Gladman, and even Bob, dear fellow, who was constantly at the Cottage, both apparently believed it was by mere chance that Amy had come back on a visit to the Farm.

How Amy came was this : Lady Pawlett had, it seemed, grown weary of taking her plain, simple-minded daughter out in society. The world would believe now she had tried to do her duty by both girls, and—owing to their own fault—had failed. She herself had gone off gaily with Alice to Nice for the winter, having, to the surprise of some of her acquaintances, established a fast alliance with the young sister-in-law, who had ousted her from being mistress at Broadhams. The arrangement pleased both ; at least, for the time being.

Sir Dudley could say little about doubtful society, and improper, however delightful, amusements, when his pretty wife was accompanied everywhere by his sister ; a matron of such established fashionable virtue that all Lady Pawlett did, if not quite right, could

hardly yet be wrong. (Indeed, she strained at a gnat, and could swallow a camel more unblushingly than any woman I ever knew.) And her ladyship, feeling *passée*, was charmed to hunt, coupled with the lovely young Lady Digges ; who attracted crowds of admirers and was the reigning belle of the Riviera that year. Our poor pretty Alice !

So Amy Pawlett had come to Wheatfield Farm. Hence, I hardly know how, she transferred herself by degrees, as it were, to the Artist's Cottage, where she had now wholly taken up her abode. She attended upon my mother like a daughter, at all times, with simple goodness ; but as to happiness ! she was gladdened all through her honest soul whenever the invalid less often, and perhaps querulously enough, allowed her to wait upon him.

"That is a good girl, a fine girl," said Bob to me privately each visit he paid. "She tells me she is training herself now to be a nurse some day, as her sister Charlotte went into a sisterhood. But she is too good for that sort of thing—isn't she, Pleasance ? you tell her so."

Dear Bob ! His heart was so with us all whom he loved, that he could not stay very long this spring at the lonely Barn by himself, without coming over to see us for a day or two.

On his last visit, he and I went out together one glorious sunshiny morning, for a ramble "to remind us of old times." He had been talking again, quite enthusiastically this time, of Amy's goodness, and beautiful daily devotion to both my mother and Beau.

"In a stranger, you know ; that's where the wonder of it is !" said the good fellow simply. "And Beau is so

thankless, too—I declare if she did half as much for me I'd, I'd . . . well, I don't know that I ever want to be married—not certainly for some years at any rate—but if I ever *did*, that's the sort of honest girl would suit me for a wife."

Not for some years, I repeated silently to myself. In some years the slender flame of life must have flickered out, that my mother and Amy strove so tenderly to keep alive by their ministrations. Who knew, then, whether the words of our dear, foolish March Hare might not come true after all? though women's hearts and the ways of fate are equally impossible to foretell.

Our steps had strayed down a primrose hill, attracted (as was always a matter of course with us all!) by the musical ripple of the Teign. Here the river flowed shallow and silvern, babbling among roots and rocks. Birds were singing in the fresh green of the thorn brake behind us. . Young lambs were bleating in the buttercup meadows, and the cuckoo was heard from the depths of the oak-wood. "Isn't it perfectly jolly!" sighed Bob in ecstasy. "But I say—why—what—you're not attending to me, Pleasance, but always looking about as if you wanted somebody. Oh, *I see*" (as past some alder bushes a tweed shooting-coat suddenly came in view, the wearer thereof was, as saith Izaak Walton, enjoying "the most honest, ingenious, quiet, and harmless art of angling").

"Hi, hi, Bracy! here is some one wants you; at least I know she doesn't want *me*, as she used, though she used to be glad enough to coax me out with her."

"I like very much to be wanted in that way, even without the coaxing," and Fulke smiled at me, looking very little older, and just as handsome as when I first

saw him in my childhood's years, midmost of this very stream, some miles away up yonder by Gidleigh. It was where the trees overhead darkened the water, while boulders and steep hill-sides made the glen wildly impassable; and I was prisoned on a rock in the pool. So I smiled back in his eyes, feeling, as when a child, that his was a god-like form to me, the handsomest, kindest of men ever seen or known.

We were leaning on a gate, leading into the meadow where John Gladman's great prize bull and beautiful cows, the pride of his heart and the glory of the Shire, were grazing. On the other side of the hawthorn hedge voices approached us, singing together :

Oh, I went to the fair with a heart all so merry ;
Sing hey down, ho down, derry down dee !
And I bought a gay ribbon, as red as a cherry,
For the girl I loved best, and who vowed to love me !
I returned from the fair, gaily whistling and singing,
My true-lover's knot I in triumph was bringing.

At this juncture the man's voice suddenly swelled louder, outsinging fairly the feminine treble, while, apparently delighted with his own cleverness, he triumphantly changed the refrain by one word ; shouting :

But it was *now* for me that I heard the bells ringing,
Sing hey down, ho down, derry down dee !

Away up the valley the bells of the gray moorstone church could be heard at that very moment merrily ringing. "Practising for to-morrow," quoth Bob. "Won't they ring up jolly well for this double wedding ! at least, I know I've promised them beer enough for them to be all drowned in it."

Just then, as if to complete the scene, that only wanted her presence, came Mrs. Gladman. She was walking gently along the river's bank, from the direction of the Artist's Cottage; an empty basket hung on her arm that had, no doubt, been full of delicacies made by her own hands.

We all turned to welcome that kindly, most motherly being, who always seemed chiefest among us all.

"How happy you all look; that is just as it should be," she said, smiling round upon us.

"Well! *you* look just as happy," we all exclaimed in chorus, defying her to contradict us.

"So I am," confessed the good woman, laughing as if half-ashamed of her own beaming face. And then, coming aside to me, she whispered, putting her arm in mine: "Certainly, I had settled you four young people differently together in my own mind, but there!—you will be happier with Fulke, dear Pleasance, as I can see now for myself; and Rose will be the best of little daughters to me, now that I cannot have you."

Later again there comes to me, like a waking dream, the remembrance of driving once more through the woods of Stoke, all green in their fresh spring bravery; *driving home!*

The lake, lying still under the embosoming hills and woods, came in view, with the swans on its surface still floating double,

swan and shadow,

as of old.

And there! there! was the old house at last, looking no whit changed; every window in its western gables glowing crimson, illumined by the setting sun in our

honour—ours ! Fulke and I silently turned and looked in each other's eyes with full understanding and gladness. Husband and wife, we sat side by side in the carriage.

At the porch we stopped, alighted, and there clasping hands by mute consent we two crossed once more the threshold of our dear old home in the West Country—we two together.

THE END.

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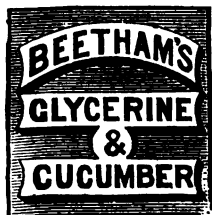
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greatest satisfaction, for *I find it the very best."*

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